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Metaphors as a Tool for Expressing the Parental Experience of Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perception of the parental experience of parents of children with disabilities using metaphors. This study was conducted in Israel with a group of 150 parents of children with a variety of disabilities participated in the study. The research tool was a questionnaire in which the parents were asked to present a metaphor that best expresses their personal perception of parenting a child with a disability. In the analysis, four themes were determined: "Pressure cooker, race and survival" - the difficulties of coping during growth; "New and unknown journey" - an unknown journey that

includes learning and surprises; "A roller coaster with ups and downs" - the fluctuations in raising a child with a disability; and "Empowering gift" - the positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability. Most of the metaphors focused around the themes of the difficulties of coping and fluctuations in raising a child with a disability. The research findings may mainly help multi-professional teams to develop awareness of the parents' experience and formulate ways of assistance and support that will lead to coordinated and collaborative work with them.

Keywords: The Parenting Experience, Parents of a Child with a Disability, a Child with a Disability, Metaphors

Introduction

Parenting a Child with a Disability

Parenting is considered a wonderful experience that combines overt behavior and hidden mental-emotional thought processes (Mikolajczak *et al.*, 2019) [22]. Parenting is a process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood; and characterized by commitment, responsibility, affectionate and supportive behaviors and emotional involvement (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018; Fuentes *et al.*, 2019) [11, 13].

When a child is born with a disability or when a suspicion of a disability arises during the child's development, the parent undergoes a shake-up and there is a significant violation of his role as a parent and of the entire family system. A child with a disability is a child with one or more disabilities that limit their level of functioning. The types of disabilities are diverse, among them: intellectual-developmental disability, mental disability, emotional-behavioral disability, physical disability, sensory disability (hearing or vision), disability on the autistic spectrum, learning disabilities, attention disorder, developmental delay in the functional or lip domain or diseases and syndromes Rarity (Special Education Law in Israel, 2018). In the State of Israel, there are approximately 269,900 children with various disabilities between the ages of birth and 17 (Barlev *et al.*, 2021) [1]; Each of these children has parents dealing with their upbringing.

The process of coping and adaptation of the parents continues over time. The parents are required to adapt to a new reality, during which they exert great efforts in an attempt to manage or reduce the demands imposed on them. One of the biggest challenges in changing the path imposed on the parents is the realization that they lost the "ideal child" they were expecting, and now they must create a new image of the family and their role as parents. The parents embark on a journey into the unknown, a journey that is accompanied by a wide range of emotions, including frustration, sorrow, anxiety, uncertainty and aspects of grief (Dervishaliaj, 2013) [8].

Ujianti (2018) [31] described the stages of adaptation of the parents to the recognition of their children's disability as stages of grief and sorrow that can be felt for the death of a relative: (a) The stage of denial - the parents experience shock and disbelief at the discovery about their child and the denial is intended to prevent the feeling of pain they feel. They fear what will happen

to their child, are confused as to how they should react in this situation and sometimes even imagine a negative future for him; (b) The bargaining phase - parents try to bargain or negotiate a compromise on their child's disability and they feel that if they put in an effort, his condition will improve; (c) The anger stage - when parents realize that there is no significant improvement in their child's condition despite their efforts, they may express anger and blame themselves, their partner, the professionals and other factors in the situation; (d) Depression, shame, guilt, hopelessness and anxiety - when parents believe that their anger will not change the situation, they accept the situation and this leads to depression; (e) Acceptance - at this stage the parents are able to discuss their child's situation more easily and they manage to balance love for him and the intention to encourage him to become independent. At this stage the parents begin to concentrate on their desire to advance the child, they have the ability to discuss his situation openly and therefore, parents at this stage voluntarily cooperate with professionals to determine a realistic plan for their child.

The different stages of adaptation present a long mental journey that combines a complex coping that also stems from the demands involved in raising a child with a disability. The parents are required to mobilize mental, physical, financial, and other resources. Many parents report many difficulties and a poor quality of life compared to parents of children without disabilities. The difficulties are reflected in many areas of life: in the economic area - large expenses on diagnoses, treatments and accessories, absences from the workplace, and sometimes retirement from work and giving up a career; In the physical field - intensive treatment of a child who is often dependent on his parents in all areas of life. In many cases the child is not mobile independently, and the parents must provide him with suitable transportation or move him from place to place themselves; In the social sphere - reducing social ties, and even severing ties with the extended family; In the field of leisure time - investing a lot in the child and taking care of his needs does not allow time for other activities. Parents sometimes encounter pressure from society, especially in situations where their child exhibits unexpected behaviors, such as shouting. Due to these behaviors, the parents avoid meetings with friends and family members (Flores, 2020; Topan *et al.*, 2019) ^[12, 30].

Alongside the large literature discussing the difficulties of parents of children with disabilities, there is also literature that indicates positive feelings among parents of children with disabilities, and that adapting to the new and unexpected situation even leads to growth. In studies it was found that parents of children with disabilities reported the many strengths they manage to draw from their special parenting, a sense of pride, satisfaction and happiness and self-strengthening, and that parenting their diagnosed child helped them develop a different perspective on challenging life situations (Lara & de los Pinos, 2017; Luijckx *et al.*, 2019) ^[20, 21]. It has also been found in studies that parents of children with disabilities perceived the positive aspects of their parenting experience as enabling them to strengthen their spirituality, show tolerance and less selfishness, develop meaningful relationships with others and become

"better" people who appreciate every small achievement in life (Beighton & Wills, 2017; 2019) ^[3, 4].

The Perception of the Experience of Parenting a Child with a Disability Through Metaphors

One of the ways that makes it possible to learn about the perception of the parental experience of parents of a child with a disability is through the use of metaphors. Metaphors are cognitive structures that allow humans to conceptualize complex areas of thinking through areas of thinking that are more familiar from everyday experience and that evoke a network of values, feelings and emotions (Kaban, 2021) ^[16]. The use of metaphors in research has been common in recent years. If in the past the study of metaphor was mainly done in the fields of literature and poetry, today it has expanded to the field of human thinking. One of the main reasons for this is the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) ^[19]. According to this theory, metaphors are not just linguistic expressions to enrich expression, but a mechanism of mapping or transfer between two conceptual domains: the source domain, which is the original concept, the primary system from which the meaning is transferred, and the target domain - the secondary system to which the meaning is transferred. The accepted assumption is that the choice of metaphor is not arbitrary, but reflects the person's worldview and thoughts, that is, the metaphor tries to explain the unknown with the help of the known and make a case more understandable through analogy (Kaban, 2021) ^[16]. Metaphors bear traces of personal creativity, ability to observe, levels of knowledge and cultural values of people, and make it possible to understand everyday human phenomena and experiences in the changing and developing world (Kiral & Ozreberoglu, 2022; Ögülmüsi & Okur, 2021) ^[17, 26]. Metaphors have meanings by which they emphasize and make certain aspects of our experience coherent. A given metaphor may be the only way to highlight, understand, and coherently precisely organize those aspects of our experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) ^[19].

If so, it seems that the use of metaphors may help in understanding the perception of the inner parental experience of parents of a child with a disability. However, almost no studies were found in the research literature that directly examined the perception of the parental experience of parents of children with disabilities through the presentation of metaphors by them. A study from more than a decade ago (Van Hove *et al.*, 2009) ^[32] presented metaphors that parents of children with disabilities used during interviews with the researchers. Parents described themselves as "passengers on a new journey with surprises", during which they learn new things about raising their child. Other parents described the experience as "landing in a different place with sharp turns" and explained that they were moving from place to place, from situation to situation. Another metaphor referred to the parent as a "warrior" - a parent who has to face many difficulties and even fight for his child's rights. A more recent study (Ögülmüsi & Okur, 2021) ^[26] examined through metaphors the perception of disability in the eyes of parents of children with a specific learning disorder. Parents indicated metaphors, such as "climbing a high mountain", "a ball hanging on a string",

"digging a well with a needle", which express the difficulty of their child's disability in their eyes as parents. Other parents presented metaphors expressing alienation, loneliness and helplessness, such as "alone in the desert", "there is no solution", "a bird without wings".

In light of the unique experience of parents of children with disabilities, the purpose of the present study is to examine the perception of the parental experience of these parents through metaphors. The research seeks to examine the question: How do parents of children with disabilities perceive their parental experience? It is assumed that parents will present metaphors that reflect the special personal experience they experience during the upbringing of their child. Through these metaphors it will be possible to learn and better understand the inner world of parents, and offer practical recommendations regarding ways of assistance and support for parents and the multi-professional teams working with them in partnership in the educational settings their children study in.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The current study took place in Israel and included 150 parents whose children were diagnosed as children with disabilities. The age of the parents ranges between 26-60 years. Out of 150 parents, 140 mothers and 10 fathers answered the questionnaire (93.33% vs. 6.6%). Most of the parents (about 75%) who participated in the study are married. In terms of education - most of the parents (about 70%) have an academic education. About half of the parents in the sample (52%) were parents of children on the autistic spectrum, the rest of the parents were parents of children with various types of disabilities - intellectual-developmental disability, physical disability, rare diseases and syndromes, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, specific learning disorder, attention disorder, mental/behavioral/emotional. The participants were sampled for the study using a non-probability sampling method of the convenience and snowball type. They answered a questionnaire using an online link built in the Google Forms application, and the questionnaire was answered anonymously. The questionnaire was distributed in three ways: by publishing the research among close and distant dating circles; by sending a message to a WhatsApp group of parents of children with disabilities, of which the researchers are members; and through advertising on the researchers' Facebook page.

The Research Tool

The research tool was a questionnaire in which the parents were asked to present a metaphor that best expresses their personal perception of parenting a child with a disability. The instruction for the parents was: Complete the following sentence: "My life as a parent of a child with a disability is like _____. In addition, the parents were asked to explain the reason for choosing that metaphor. The instruction was: "The reason for choosing the word I wrote in the previous section is: _____. The parents also filled in demographic details about themselves - mother/father, age, marital status, and education, as well as details about their child with the disability - the age of the child and the type of disability.

Ethical Aspects of the Research

At the beginning of the questionnaire it was stated that a

parent who fills out the questionnaire expresses his/her consent to take part in the study. It was also stated that the data collected is for research purposes only, the details of the parents will remain confidential and the answers will appear anonymously.

Metaphor as the Research Tool

In order to examine how parents, perceive their experience as parents of children with disabilities, a phenomenological study was carried out in the qualitative research paradigm. Phenomenological research deals with the study of the essence of human experience. The phenomenon is the object of the investigation. The researcher collects information from the researcher who experienced the experience personally as he aims to explore its meaning in their daily lives (Deniz, 2016) [7]. In the present study, the perception of the parental experience for a child with a disability can be understood through metaphors chosen by the parents. The assumption was that the metaphor the parents would choose would reflect their inner world as parents of children with disabilities. The parents' explanations regarding the choice of the metaphor will reveal aspects of their perception of the parental experience and will make it possible to understand their point of view.

Data Analysis

In the first stage, all the metaphors that the parents chose were examined, and they were counted according to the frequency of their appearance. Next, the parents' reasons for choosing the metaphors were examined. Examining the reasons is very important, because people can choose different metaphors but their reasons for choosing the metaphors are the same (Sudajit-apa, 2017) [29]. For example, there were cases where two parents chose a different metaphor but stated the same reason - a parent chose the "waves in the sea" metaphor and stated that the reason for the choice is that "sometimes they are at the top because there is progress, and sometimes at the bottom because they get bad test results and see that there is no progress."; Another parent chose the "swing" metaphor and stated a similar reason: "There are periods of growth because there is progress, and there are periods of decline, difficult periods because there is no progress." Thus, the parents' explanation for the choice of metaphor reflects their parental experience. For this reason, the analysis of the qualitative information was based on the analysis of the explanations given by the parents for the choice of metaphors as a complement to the analysis of the metaphors themselves. The metaphors and their explanations were examined by the researchers. Each researcher separately read the metaphors and explanations of the parents, after which a joint discussion was held about them, and the themes were determined. The determined themes were transferred to the review of another female researcher who specializes in qualitative data analysis. Agreement between researchers is essential for a reliable analysis of the materials and to reduce biases arising from the approach of the researcher (Hill *et al.*, 2005) [14].

Findings

The current study examined the metaphors that parents used to describe their experience of parenting a child with a disability. Table 1 shows the frequency of the metaphors, indicating the division into themes obtained in the

qualitative analysis. The analysis of the qualitative information was based, as mentioned, on the analysis of the parents' explanations for the choice of metaphors as a complement to the analysis of the metaphors themselves. After examining the metaphors and explanations, the following four themes were determined:

1. "Pressure cooker, race and survival" - the difficulties of

coping during growing up;

2. "New and unknown journey" - an unknown journey that includes learning and surprises;

3. "A roller coaster with ups and downs" - the fluctuations in raising a child with a disability;

4. "An empowering gift" - the positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability.

Table 1: The grouping of metaphors by division into themes

No.	Theme	Metaphor	f	%
1	"A roller coaster with ups and downs" - the fluctuations in raising a child with a disability	roller coaster (53), sea, currents in the sea, waves in the sea (11), swing (3), amusement park (3), once up and once down (2), Ferris wheel (1), pendulum (1), difficulty and pleasure (1), lottery (1), roulette (1), elevator (1).	78	52%
2	"Pressure cooker, race and survival" - coping difficulties during growth	challenge (9), marathon run (3), volcano (2), race (1), ninja track (1), I have a big baby (1), work hard all the time (1), movie that never ends (1), never ending work (1), nonstop Life (1), survival (1), stopper (1), nightmare (1), war (1), always dependent on my child (1), pressure cooker (1), a difficult life (1), like a wild plant (1), a concrete heart (1), walking on a tightrope, like lullaby (1), a limitation at home (1), a limited life (1), helplessness (1), life is like a broken pottery vessel (1), a lonely island (1), life is like a wall between me and the world (1), a pot with a hole (1).	38	25.33%
3	"A new and unknown journey" - an unknown journey that includes learning and surprises	a long journey, a journey, a journey into the unknown, a new and unfamiliar journey, life is a journey, a journey of discovery to an unknown land (7), a box of surprises, a bag of surprises (3), an adventure, a never-ending adventure (2), living on a different track, with windows to the sides (1), mosaic (1), weather (1), a long and important lesson for life (1), a seedling in growth (1).	17	11.33%
4	"An empowering gift" - the positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability	a gift from heaven, a gift from God, an empowering gift (4), a special life (1), a dream (1), an ordinary life (1), heaven in this world (1), a mirror... a parent for any child or any person (1), the cake of my life (1), a blooming garden (1), a prayer (1), thanks to the Creator of the world (1), on the one hand a person is imprisoned, on the other hand another person (1), an out-of-body experience (1), the life of each parent only with fewer hours of sleep (1), a long journey with a lot of beauty, joy and satisfaction (1).	17	11.33%
Summary			150	100%

It can be seen in Table 1 that most of the parents' metaphors referred to theme number 1 which focuses on fluctuations in raising a child with a disability (n=78, f=52%). In second place are the metaphors in theme number 2 which focuses on coping difficulties during the child's upbringing (n=38, f=25.33%). The other two themes had the same number of metaphors (n=17, f=11.33%). Each of these themes is presented in detail below.

Theme 1: "A roller coaster with ups and downs" - the fluctuations in raising a child with a disability

Metaphors describing parenting a child with a disability as a process of ups and downs were the most common metaphors among the parents in the current study, among them: "roller coaster", "elevator", "swing", "amusement park", "Ferris wheel", "pendulum", "waves in the sea", or simply "rises and falls". Nearly 40% of the parents chose the "roller coaster" metaphor. This metaphor is mentioned in many studies where the parents described the experience of parenting a child with a disability. Nurullah (2013) [25] presented the parents' coping as a roller coaster ride - sometimes there is stress, pressure, worry, anxiety, frustration and sometimes there is relaxation, contentment, satisfaction and the feeling of raising a "normal" child with typical development. Miller (2020) [23] called his book in which he describes the experience of parenting his daughter with a disability a "roller coaster". He claimed that every

time a child with a disability is born, the parents are "thrown into a roller coaster", which has steep ascents, sharp turns and descents, all of which express a whirlwind of emotions that the parents find themselves in. The parents will walk around in the whirlwind of emotions for months and even years until they manage to get out of it, or in other words "get off the roller coaster". The whirlwind of emotions begins already in the first stages of the diagnosis, the sharp transition from the pain of guilt to mobilization and strength (Zappella, 2016) [34].

The parents' explanations in the present study for the choice of metaphors expressing ups and downs were different, for example: "moments of worry, fear, anger [...] versus moments of happiness, extreme pride and infinite love."; "You feel adrenaline, joy from every progress even the smallest [ascents]. At the same time, there are descents along the way where you feel a little low."; "Sometimes everything is good and fun and sometimes it's scary because you don't know what the child wants because he doesn't talk."; "Sometimes I'm optimistic, sometimes he makes progress and sometimes he doesn't make progress or goes back and then it's harder for me mentally."; "I'm like a flower pot, I find strength, I cope, and then the water drains from the pot and it's hard for me to cope, there is a drastic drop, until the next time and all over again, starting to rise." It can be assumed that there is a connection between the pressure the parents are under in raising a child with a

disability and the emotional turmoil. According to Hsiao (2017) ^[15] the parental pressure among parents of children with disabilities leads to an imbalance in their status. The parents are required to establish parenting patterns suitable for the child, to acquire new skills, to divide the roles at home and the distribution of the family's resources in a different way, and in addition to deal with social stigma.

Theme 2: "Pressure cooker, race and survival" - the difficulties of dealing with growing up

The upbringing of a child with a disability greatly affects the emotional, mental, social and economic condition of the parents as well as the functioning of the family unit as a whole. The parents deal every day with the difficulties and the pressures involved in raising the child, which are manifested in many areas of life: in the economic area, in the physical area, in the social area, in the area of leisure time and more (Flores, 2020) ^[12]. The heavy burden placed on the parents includes daily difficulties that are expressed in various metaphors chosen by the parents: "volcano", "pressure cooker", "nightmare", "survival". One of the mothers chose the metaphor "race" and explained that "in raising a child with a disability there is a load and endless running, jingling between treatments and trainings and life itself, including the care of the other children." Another mother chose the metaphor "stopper" which she claims emphasizes "a lot of pressure, everything around the child." Another aspect of the difficulties of coping refers to the parents' need to connect and coordinate the medical, treatment and education professionals, to motivate and accompany processes and make decisions in many areas. During the coordination, the parents often encounter bureaucratic difficulties, a lack of coordination between the authorities, a lack of information and a lack of resources (Topan *et al.*, 2019) ^[30]. One of the mothers presented these difficulties using the "war" metaphor and explained: "There is bureaucracy everywhere, in treatments, in raising appropriate resources for the child, in the health system, in the education system, in the child development institute..."

Nowland *et al.* (2021) ^[24] found in a review of articles that loneliness is one of the characteristics of parents of children with disabilities. In this kind of parenting, social interactions are almost non-existent, the parents adapt to a state of loneliness and come to understand that they are alone in the battle. The feeling of loneliness was expressed by two mothers: one chose the metaphor "desolate island" and her explanation was: "I feel alone in the universe." The second chose to describe her parenting as "like a wild plant" and explained: "My life as a parent of a child with a disability is compared to a wild plant, that's how I feel, lonely, alone."

The metaphor that came up most frequently in this topic was "challenge". It seems that raising a child involves many difficulties including stress, running, struggles, pressures and a lot of loneliness, making the parents' lives particularly challenging.

Theme 3: "A new and unfamiliar journey" - an unknown journey that includes learning and surprises

The recognition of the child's disability creates a complete change during the planned life of the parent and diverts him to a personal journey accompanied by internal and psychological changes in an endless process of situations that require repeated dealing with pressures and adaptation. With the discovery of the disability, the parents begin a

journey to a new world. Even when the type of disability is known, parents discover something new every day about the disability, its characteristics, ways of educating and treating it, the consequences of the disability on the child throughout his life cycle and the consequences on their parental experience (Dervishaj, 2013; Zappella, 2016) ^[8, 34]. In the current study, many parents focused on this journey, a journey that combines surprises and new things that constantly emerge throughout life. Much use was made of metaphors that expressed this journey, such as: "a new and unfamiliar journey" because "everything is unfamiliar and new."; "box of surprises" because "you never know what will happen."; or "a journey of discovery in an unknown land" because "we are entering a new world." Other parents emphasized the steps in the journey: "an adventure that never ends" because "every age and its challenges, every period discovers new things." And "life is a journey" because "the road is long and has so many stages, turns, turns, every morning you wake up to a different reality." It can be foreseen, that parenting a child with a disability is presented by many of the parents as a new journey accompanied by surprises, a journey they did not choose, but are forced to walk on, and at each stage of their child's development, they are faced with new situations that must be dealt with.

Theme 4: "An empowering gift" - the positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability

Parents of a child with a disability may experience difficulties, conflicts, frustrations and disappointments, but may also be a central resource for the family to cope with. Parents who manage to move from crisis to growth, change their worldview and see a different meaning in their lives. Studies have found that parents of children with disabilities report positive experiences involving parenting. Parents of children with disabilities stated that their child taught them to accept others, show tolerance towards others, and develop a different perspective on challenging life situations. Parents even stated that their child with the disability taught them to appreciate life and develop vigilance for the needs of others. Also, there were parents who stated that living alongside a disability develops in them an optimistic view, humility, non-judgment, enjoyment of small achievements, generosity and above all strength, strength and control (Beighton & Wills, 2017; Lara & Pinos, 2017; Luijckx *et al.*, 2019) ^[3, 20, 21].

A meta-analysis of studies that examined positive aspects of raising a child with a disability (Beighton & Wills, 2019) ^[4] also adds information regarding seeing the child with the disability as a source of happiness and strength in the family, and as a factor leading to spirituality, closeness and cohesion between family members. In the current study, several parents chose metaphors that emphasized these positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability. One mother chose the metaphor "a long journey with a lot of beauty, joy and satisfaction", and explained that she chose this metaphor because "special parenting is a powerful and fascinating life experience, which gives a lot of strength." Another mother chose the metaphor "on the one hand a person is imprisoned but on the other hand another person" and explained that "on the one hand there is a disability for the child, but on the other hand the disability made the family into other people, considerate, appreciate what there is." One of the fathers chose the metaphor "a gift from

heaven" and explained that "the girl came as a gift, for the sake of society, to make us all compassionate, kind, sensitive to the pain of others." Another mother chose the metaphor "flowering garden" and explained her choice as follows: "In the blooming garden there are many paths with obstacles and once you face the obstacles it strengthens you and teaches you and makes you jump and this leads to courage, knowledge and confidence."

It seems that certain parents in the present study decided to point out the positive aspects of raising a child with a disability and emphasized aspects related to strengthening and family cohesion, developing awareness of others, acceptance and tolerance towards others.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perception of the parental experience of parents of children with disabilities. The research examined the question: How do parents of children with disabilities perceive their parenting experience? The test was carried out using metaphors presented by the parents and the explanations they gave for the metaphors they chose. The assumption was that the metaphors the parents would choose and the explanations they would present for their choice would reflect their experience as parents of a child with a disability and would help to understand their inner world. An analysis of the metaphors indicated a high prevalence of feelings of volatility and imbalance during child rearing (52%) and of difficulties in coping with child rearing (25.33%). The difficulties appear on many levels, such as: the interpersonal, social, marital, economic, emotional, physical and functional domains, and affect the quality of life and mental well-being of the parents (Lara & de los Pinos, 2017) [20].

The fluctuations during the upbringing of the child can be attributed to the difficulty in the sense of coherence that the parents experience. A sense of coherence is an important element in predicting the adaptation of the parents and their quality of life and is essential in dealing with raising a child with a disability. However, this feeling was found in studies to be low among the parents of these children and to be related to their great stress and low mental well-being (Einav & Margalit, 2019) [9]. The difficulty in understanding the new situation of raising a child with a disability, the need to manage the situation and gain meaning from their parenting, all of these make the parenting experience difficult and lead to imbalance and deep emotional fluctuations, imagined by the parents mainly through the "roller coaster" metaphor.

In a meta-analysis by Wang *et al* (2022) [33] it was found that difficulties and imbalance lead to parental stress, which affects the quality of life of parents of children with disabilities. However, support from the environment reduces the pressure that parents are under. The support from the environment includes support from the multi-professional team in the educational framework in which the child with the disability studies. A cooperative relationship between the parents and the staff in the educational framework and optimal integration of their child lead to an increase in the mental well-being of the parents and their empowerment (Cheng *et al.*, 2021) [6]. Therefore, it seems that the findings of the present study may develop awareness of multi-professional teams about the difficulties and emotional fluctuations of parents of children with disabilities. This

awareness can lead to promoting support for parents, empowering them and recruiting them into an optimal partnership. Exposure to parents' experiences is important already in the teaching training phase. Koch (2020) [18], found that exposure to the experiences of parents of children with disabilities already in the training phase helps students understand the parents, gain insights into the importance of promoting a positive, supportive and collaborative atmosphere based on security, trust and empathy.

The metaphor "journey" also appeared with high frequency and was linked to the topic of the new and unknown journey that parents of a child with disabilities go through. A number of parents (11.33%) present their parentage in this way. Through the parents' metaphors and explanations, you can experience the journey they go through: the suspicion, the diagnosis, the learning, the treatment, the family preparation, the choice of the educational framework, and more (Shattnawi *et al.*, 2020) [28]. The joining of the multi-professional team in the parents' journey is important, it may give the parents a feeling that they are not alone in the journey, that they have partners who accompany them and help them discover and learn new things about their child, about his disability and its characteristics, the ways of educating and treating it, and more. The team's accompaniment and support during the parents' journey helps them deal with the new issues they are exposed to while raising their child (Eremina *et al.*, 2020; Zappella, 2016) [10, 34].

Special attention should be directed towards the metaphors that present positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability. Certain parents (11.33%) mentioned the positive sides of parenting a child with a disability, and used metaphors expressing gift, happiness, strength, confidence and empowerment. It seems that in many cases the difficulties and fluctuations during the upbringing of the child enable the rebuilding of the worldview, receiving a different meaning to life and strengthening oneself and the family. Many parents turn to a path of social-community action, such as joining parent leadership and parent support groups; Doing so allows parents to focus on the values of responsibility and helping others instead of focusing on difficulties and is a basis for a sense of empowerment (Blake *et al.*, 2019) [5]. As part of the dialogue of the multi-professional teams with the parents, it is important to emphasize the family resources that contribute to the proper functioning of the family; Turning the spotlight on the positive sides of parenting allows us to see a potential for improving support systems that may have a positive effect on the entire family system (Beighton & Wills, 2019) [4]. Therefore, it is important that multi-professional teams work to formulate intervention plans that promote parents' resources, resilience and their sense of coherence, these have been found in the research literature to be significant in the processes of promoting adaptive functioning among parents of children with disabilities (Oranga *et al.*, 2022) [27]. In conclusion, the current study is another layer in the literature that attempts to examine the parental experience of parents of children with disabilities. The uniqueness of the current study is in examining this experience through metaphors, which the parents chose to describe their parenting, and the explanation they presented for choosing metaphors. The choice of metaphors is not arbitrary and reflects the perception of the world and the thoughts and feelings of the person (Kaban, 2021) [16]. The choice of

metaphors and the explanation for the choice made it possible to observe through unique lenses the special parenting - its characteristics, difficulties and strengths. This observation provides information about the journey that parents of a child with a disability embark on, and thus it can serve as an effective tool for revealing repressed and unconscious content that is hidden from society. A multi-professional team that will be exposed to the inner world of the parents, will be able to work in a more coordinated and cooperative way with the parents, thereby strengthening them and promoting their child in educational and therapeutic settings. Also, exposure to the inner world of the parents may help to remove environmental barriers and negative attitudes involving stigma and discrimination towards these parents. It seems that happiness, pride, satisfaction and strength are also characteristics of parenting a child with a disability, however the social perception focuses on difficulties and in this way the parents may be denied the opportunity to appropriate positive experiences as a significant part of their parenting. It is important to examine the positive experiences that do not receive a prominent place in the social discourse.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Studies

Based on the findings of the present study, several limitations can be noted and additional research directions can be suggested:

1. In the present study, the parents were not asked about the severity of their children's disability. It is possible that the severity of the disability affects the parents' experience, because of the need for different resources. In further research, it is recommended to check data relating to the severity of the disability, such as the child's level of functioning, the type of setting he studies in, the treatments he receives, and more.
2. The issue of birth order, the position of the child with the disability in the family was not examined in the current study. It is possible that different findings will be obtained when it comes to an eldest child or a young child or an only child in the family.
3. Most of the parents who participated in the study were parents of children on the autistic spectrum (52%). It is desirable in further research to examine parents of children with more diverse types of disabilities.
4. Most of the participants were mothers (93%). It is desirable in future research to take care of a larger number of fathers who will take part in the research. This is in light of studies that reported on the different coping skills of fathers and mothers of children with disabilities (Wang *et al.*, 2022) ^[33].

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