

*Are We Ready to Have Teachers with Learning Disabilities?
A Study of School Principals' Observations*

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Abstract

For decades, lawmakers, parents, and educators have advocated for including students with learning disabilities (LD) and addressing their needs within the education system. However, LD-related challenges do not vanish with age; consequently, for college and university graduates with LD, the issue of inclusion begins again when they reach the job market, including when they want to become teachers. The success of inclusion relies on the society's readiness to change and to accept people with a variety of difficulties in all areas of life. This study focuses on school principals' views regarding the hiring of teachers with LD. Apparently, although principals understand the variety of ways students with special needs should be included, they still struggle with the idea of including teachers with LD.

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The inclusion of people with special needs is an ongoing process that began early in the twentieth century and has spread around the world in a variety of ways. The process is not, and probably never will be, complete. Each time a new type of special need is recognized, society as a system faces a new challenge. This is because the inclusion of people with special needs is not a just a phrase or a slogan; rather, it is a practice that affects society at large. The inclusion approach is a principle that leads to the creation of an inclusive and caring society. Inclusion is practically expressed as the reciprocity between people with special needs and the rest of society. When people are willing to accept those with special needs as capable of contributing to their social environment and not as a mere burden on society, then inclusion is on the right path (Kozminsky, 2003).

Over the last thirty years, the inclusion of students with special needs in the education system has been encouraged by lawmakers, parents, and educators. Although schools are continuously improving the processes for inclusion, the process in society in general has not evolved accordingly (Flavian, 2011). Thus, special needs that are readily visible are more easily accepted and accommodated than are special needs which are not immediately detected, such as learning difficulties. Although for the most part, children with LD are included and are able to study with their peers throughout their school years, when they seek admission into higher education programs in order to become teachers, they are often frowned upon or discouraged, if not openly rejected. Nevertheless, over the last decade, some teachers with special needs have begun teaching in mainstream schools, but this path is not open to all (Green & Storm, 2010).

Learning Disabilities

The concept of "learning disabilities" indicates difficulties and/or disorders that interfere in the process of acquiring basic academic skills, such as reading, writing and math. These disorders are caused by dysfunctional neurological processes related to the development of language, visual perception, and attention. Their manifestations can range from minor disorders, which can be overcome through hard work targeting specific learning goals, to major disorders that are best addressed by studying in specially-devised programs (Chandler, 2010). According to the DSM-5 (Paul, 2013), LD can affect a variety of academic skills; assessments are initiated when a student's performance is significantly lower than expected of the pertinent age group. In addition, other difficulties that often accompany LD include low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and difficulties in adjusting to school or work settings.

In addition to the general goals of imparting knowledge and introducing students to unfamiliar domains, schools aim to provide students with the tools needed for cognitive, emotional, and social self-development. Teaching students with LD necessitates the use of teaching and learning strategies that can help them meet and overcome the constant challenges and barriers that the LD might pose. Given that learning disabilities do not diminish over one's lifespan, the acquisition of proper learning strategies increases the ability of people with LD to study, organize their time, and deal with everyday tasks and assignments. Moreover, these tools give them the opportunity to identify their strengths and to learn how to use them when facing specific learning difficulties.

Adaptations for Learning and Professional Training

Modified learning programs are developed in schools to provide students with LD the opportunity to graduate with their peers (Flavian, 2010). The same academic adjustments can be offered in the process of professional training, as long as the modifications do not detract from the level of professionalism. Teachers in training need to become experts in the domains they teach, while studying pedagogy and the didactic approach to teaching. In order to manage teaching others, teacher-trainees with LD need to master extra skills related to self-management, class management, teaching strategies and the use of certain technologies in the classroom. Not surprisingly, people with LD training in any domain or profession can develop and become very effective workers in their respective fields, provided they have received the necessary support and acquired helpful and complementary strategies with which to meet the related challenges (Gerber, 2012).

Few researchers (Stacey & Singleton, 2003; Leyser, 2011) have studied the challenges adults with LD face on a daily basis and have addressed the type of adjustments that they require in their workplace in order to be able to succeed like everyone else. Likewise, the process of including teachers with LD at schools requires the support and understanding of colleagues, supervisors and others, who are prepared to take into account the needs of these teachers. Affording these professionals the adjustments they require would ensure their inclusion in the schools and in the workforce, and thus would be beneficial not only for the student body at the schools, but also for the development of a more just and equitable society.

The current study attempted to investigate ways to make the process of inclusion teachers with LD as a viable goal for Israeli schools, by examining the attitudes of school principals. More

specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore ways to help conduct inclusion efficiently and not automatically, so that this practice might truly have a social-educational impact.

Research Questions

The main goal of this study was to better understand principals' views regarding the challenges and advantages schools face when opting to include teachers with LD as members of their school's educational staff. Gaining an understanding of the principals' views may be helpful both in preparing teacher-trainees with LD to enter the job market after graduation, and in preparing the school-community and the work environment in which they will be included.

Three main questions guided this study:

- What are the school principals' attitudes to inclusion in general, and to the inclusion of teachers with LD in particular?
- Do the school principals experience any difficulties or dilemmas about hiring candidates with LD to teach in their schools, and if so, what are they?
- What advice might the school principals have for teachers with LD?

Methodology

Participants

This study included 10 principals of public, state-funded schools. These schools operate under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and therefore they are obligated to follow to a core curriculum. Students are assigned to these schools according to their place of residence, precluding any option to choose a preferred school. Nine of the participants were principals of ordinary public schools, while one of them was the principal of a special-education school for children with complex learning disabilities.

School principals selected for participation in this study met the following criteria: had 10 years of experience teaching in state-funded schools; held a Master's degree in a field related to educational leadership; had worked in their current position for at least three years; and expressed their willingness to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. The 10 schools are located in five different cities, and the school principals were not informed of the identity of the other participants.

Given the fact that the school was already following the governmental mandate regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce, there was no need to specifically inquire whether other members of the school staff approved of the inclusion of teachers with LD.

Materials and Procedures

This study used a qualitative methodology in all stages, from data collection through context analysis and culminating in the final conclusions. Each of the 10 principals participated in an in-depth, individual interview, which was led by two interviewers working simultaneously and employing open ended questions. While one interviewer was engaged in conversation with the interviewee, the role of the second interviewer was to mind the direction and development of the conversation, making sure that all questions were addressed and all aspects of the issue were sufficiently explored (Shkedi, 2011).

The following opening question was used in all of the interviews: "From your perspective as principal, tell us what you envision for your school". Using the answer as a point of departure, the interviewers developed a discussion, during which interviewees revealed their key educational values and attitudes towards the inclusion of children and adults with special needs in school and in society in general. The interviewer then introduced the issue of teachers with LD.

As principals did not consent to have the interviews recorded, notes were taken during the interviews, transcribed in full at the conclusion of each interview, and then submitted to context analysis, which was conducted separately by three researchers. The analysis focused on identifying concepts and criteria that could help emphasize the essential views of the principals. Next, all three researchers discussed their findings, in preparation for the next interview. Therefore, although the basic interview questions had been formulated in advance, prior to each subsequent interview, a few unique questions were added.

Following the 10th interview, the three researchers jointly analyzed the aggregated context as a whole. In addition, at the end of the study, researchers offered to share results with the participants in order to integrate their insights as part of the study and to learn if they had other points of view to present. Only two principals agreed. The leading-researcher met with each of them for an hour, explaining the data-analysis process and the conclusions. Feedback from both participants strengthened the researchers' conclusions.

Results and Discussion

This study is based on information collected through in-depth, individual interviews held with 10 school principals, in order to add new information that could help more efficient inclusion of teachers with LD. Although some of the staff hiring decisions are made by regional supervisors, principals usually opt to interview prospective new teachers so they can better prepare for the school year. Therefore, understanding principals' overt and covert views could help reveal the potential advantages of (as well as potential obstacles to) the inclusion of teachers with LD. Nowadays, children with various special needs, including LD, are integrated into mainstream schools and are directed to specific academic, behavioral or emotional programs. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that all the principals in the study were familiar with the concept of "learning disabilities" and with the adaptations these students need in order to succeed in school. Moreover, they all agreed that when children's special needs are unrelated to either emotional or behavioral difficulties, the entire student body benefits from the inclusion. Only one principal, who was the head of a special-education school, presented a slightly different approach: "although it is very important to include students with special needs in schools, it is more important to find the right schools for them that have teachers with special training and who can teach them despite their difficulties".

Unexpectedly, although all participants were familiar with the notion of LD and with the successful outcomes related to the learning processes they experience and the special strategies they acquire, the principals found it hard at first to accept the fact that adults with LD might wish

to become teachers. The principals' attitudes towards inclusion were less enthusiastic when the issue of teachers with LD was introduced.

In answering the question regarding the inclusion of teachers with LD in schools, all the principals raised four main issues: advantages, challenges, teachers' responsibilities, and principals' responsibilities.

Advantages of Including Teachers with LD

The advantage mentioned by all principals was that teachers with LD could serve as role models for their students. One of the principals explained the advantage thus:

Students who have difficulties at school easily give up on themselves. But if their teachers could speak frankly about their own experience with LD and emphasize that success is possible, as they themselves can attest, students might be motivated to keep trying.

All principals voiced the same idea, highlighting the fact that by sharing their own experiences, teachers could develop strong interpersonal relationships with their students, which could serve as a source of encouragement for these students.

Both researchers (Vogel, 2003 and Flavian, 2011), and the principals who were interviewed in this study mentioned that teachers with LD, who are constantly aware of the strategies they need to implement on a daily basis, are likely to integrate them automatically throughout the teaching process and by doing so, demonstrate the practical effects and the importance of using such strategies. In addition, teachers with LD may be more aware than their professional peers of the need to integrate a variety of learning strategies in their lessons, a practice which is undoubtedly helpful for all students, and not only for those with LD.

Another advantage mentioned is that teachers with LD may be particularly aware of and considerate towards students with LD. As one of the interviewees said: "I really think that teachers with LD have a kind of radar... it is like... if they reflect on their own learning difficulties, they can recognize their students' learning difficulties before students develop extreme feelings of frustration". Another principal said "sometimes they can detect LD better than professional diagnosticians can". This advantage has a positive effect on the teaching process overall, since a teacher who can understand the source of the difficulty can help accordingly.

Challenges to the Inclusion of Teachers with LD

After expressing the important advantages teachers with LD may have, all participants pointed out that teaching is a very stressful and complex task that demands efficient organization and planning, two skills which people with LD often find challenging. Participants said that "it is not an acceptable situation to have a teachers who cannot plan lessons ahead of time and teach accordingly", and "how can teachers teach time management if they cannot manage it for their own needs?" In these and other similar comments, the principals indicated that, in their view, teachers who cope poorly with their own LD challenges are likely to have difficulty handling the demands of the job. Nevertheless, all principals agreed that referring to the above challenges as

the school-community's challenges rather than as pertaining solely to the individual teacher would be generally beneficial for the practice and goals of inclusion.

Teachers' Responsibilities

There is no question that teachers' responsibilities encompass everything associated with students' learning processes and class management. Therefore, unsurprisingly, only a few of the principals said that it did not matter to them whether teachers had LD, as long as the teaching and learning processes were proceeding efficiently. One participant said "teachers are responsible for their students' learning...they should do whatever is needed in order to ensure learning among all", and another stated that "they [the teachers] knew well before they began their training that they had LD; it was their decision to choose a profession that would challenge them on a daily basis". While it is rational and understandable to demand that teachers be responsible for the entire learning process and the social dynamics in the classroom, the principals' reactions quoted here focus only on the degree to which the teachers handle the disability, ignoring the potential role of a supportive work environment.

In contrast, there were two principals who emphasized that "the major responsibility teachers have is to know what they do not know and to ask for whatever support they need". For teachers in general, not to mention for teachers with LD, such self-monitoring constitutes an integral part of their professional responsibility. Costello and Stone (2012) emphasize that people with LD often have a low sense of self-efficacy, which may prevent them from asking for help. Nonetheless, people with LD who choose to become teachers have a responsibility to overcome whatever obstacles or inhibitions they might face in order to fulfill their duties as mandated by the job and the situation. One participant expressed the sentiment underlying the perspective of the two principals quoted here in a more direct manner, saying that "teachers with LD cannot use their LD as an excuse for not doing their job".

Principals' Responsibilities

The question of principals' perceptions regarding their own responsibilities vis-à-vis the inclusion of teachers with LD was not posed to them directly; instead, the views on this issue implicit in their replies were highlighted in the context analysis. All the principals referred to their responsibilities in response to a direct question asking whether they would hire a teacher with LD: "I cannot hire a teacher if I am not sure she would be suitable for the job. I have a responsibility towards the children and their parents", or, "I am not sure I would like to have teachers on the staff for whom I would need to do all the organizational work. I cannot be responsible for their duties".

Despite the negative approach that might be understood from the above quotes, it is reasonable that a principal would not like to hire any candidate who could not meet the demands of the job. A more practical, and perhaps positive, view was expressed by one of the participants, who said "if I hire a teacher with LD, I need to prepare myself and the rest of the staff, since in order to benefit from all the advantages this teacher can offer, we would need to extend support and help when needed. It is our responsibility to be receptive to all".

A prominent but confusing finding was that although principals overall agreed that society has a responsibility to include everyone in the work place without discrimination, and although they

expressed their conviction that people with LD should not feel shy to be open about it – as this approach could help the teachers cope with the challenges – some of the principals strongly recommended that teachers with LD avoid talking about their struggles.

Maybe, the fact that one openly talks about LD might deter principals [from including teachers with LD in their staff] ... maybe they [teachers with LD] should do their best without telling, and should reveal this only after they have proven themselves in the professional arena.

This view is confusing also because it is inconsistent with the previously-mentioned statements that emphasized that teachers with LD should ask for help and support from their colleagues when needed. Therefore, there is no consensus among school-principals in regard to how teachers with LD should act while confronting their difficulties.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The inclusion of people with special needs in general and with LD in particular is a humanistic value that acknowledges society's responsibility to care for everyone, as well as the potential of every individual to make a positive contribution to society in a variety of ways. This value is most apparent when adaptations to the environment for the purpose of inclusion are integral to the cultural milieu, rather than a superficial response to an imposed rule.

With this caveat in mind, we turn to consider the findings of the current study. On the one hand, the principals interviewed in this study understood the benefits to be gained by including teachers with LD on the staff, yet on the other hand they also expressed hesitations about hiring them. These contradictory feelings suggest that the development of preparation programs for inclusion of teachers with LD may be a more timely strategy than drafting and enforcing new rules.

Recognizing the fact that each person has strengths and weaknesses leads students with LD to recognize their own strengths, and empowers them to deal with the LD-related difficulties by finding the appropriate strategies that suit them (Flavian, 2011). Throughout their school years, students with LD learn to adopt learning strategies that can help them succeed in all aspects of life. This experience translates into a particular advantage in assuming the role of educational leaders. More specifically, the reflective process of observing one's own functioning and selecting the most suitable strategies for a given situation is a worthy model for all students. Teachers need to make sure that every one of their students knows how to study, and can understand and implement the materials learnt. School principals who participated in this study also agreed that teachers with LD, who are aware of their own difficulties and have had to develop their own unique methods of learning, could apply this experience and, thus, may have a facility for devising practical solutions for students with LD. It is likely, as the principals in this study noted, that teachers with LD are well-equipped and uniquely qualified to guide students with LD to identify the source of their difficulties and find effective coping strategies. Moreover, these principals also agreed that offering proper support and guidance to teachers with LD would help these teachers maximize their abilities when planning lessons and implementing their knowledge and experience, for the benefit of all students.

The advantages presented herein regarding the inclusion of teachers with LD in the school's educational staff highlighted aspects of professional teaching that are not typically studied in teacher-training programs. Although becoming a role model for students is one of the values teacher-trainees are taught throughout their teacher-training programs, from the findings of this study we can learn that the subject of teachers' role-modeling and its effects should be studied further. The principals suggested that teachers with LD should share with their students their own personal experiences as students with LD, in order to become significant role models. These principals believe that if teachers share their personal stories of LD-related challenges and successes, students will look up to their teachers and feel encouraged, which in turn will strengthen their resolve to face their own (LD-related or other) personal challenges. Another aspect of professionalism that emerged from this study relates to teachers' ability to detect and understand students' academic difficulties. In addition to the common expectation of being an expert in the domain one teaches and to know how to teach, school principals believe that teachers with LD can offer an additional type of expertise, thanks to their daily struggle with their LD. Guided by their own experience, teachers with LD may be able to not only to detect the type of difficulties their students encounter, but also to help them manage their academic tasks by integrating learning strategies in their lessons, from which all students stand to benefit.

The main advantage of including teachers with LD is that it is expected to help inculcate an essential social value. Educators need to remember and to remind others that beyond the personal role model which teachers with LD can provide for their students, these teachers also have an opportunity to guide all their students to recognize and appreciate diversity among people. Students can thus learn to acknowledge their classmates on a personal level, beyond the measure of academic achievements. They learn that each one of them has unique abilities and that no one is perfect. Only by disseminating this tolerant point of view can true inclusion develop. Students may learn that everyone, including people with special needs such as their teachers and classmates, can and should contribute to others and to society.

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