

# **School Principals<sup>1</sup> and Inclusion: Views, Practices and Possible Signs of Burnout**

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Two assumptions underlie this presentation:

- a. Inclusion is "one of the more complex changes on the current education scene" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991. p. 41).
- b. The school principal, who serves as an educational leader in school life, plays a major function in implementing change.

The focus of the movement to include students with disabilities in general education has recently shifted from viewing inclusion as an innovation towards viewing it within the broader context of school restructuring. The mandate to establish inclusive policies and practices related to inclusion is regarded as a major requirement for implementing change in schools. Despite the importance of the school principal in initiating and maintaining support for change, relatively few empirical studies have been reported on this issue.

This presentation presents views and practices of school principals in Israel, in elementary and middle school, with regard to the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education schools. Following the mandate to include students with disabilities from 1996, some school principals show signs of burnout. It is well worth a closer look.

The data for these two studies was collected 6 years apart. Changes were not found in the views and attitudes of school principals but rather in their practices. Including students with disabilities is currently the reality in schools all over Israel, especially in kindergartens and elementary schools. The most prevalent mode of inclusion in elementary schools is placement within the regular class.

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<sup>1</sup> Schule Direktors / Schule Leiters

## **Education for children with special needs in Israel**

During the 2006/2007 school-year, there were 1,755,262 pupils in the Israeli education system. Special education services are provided to approximately 10% of the pupils, with 2% attending special facilities i.e. special schools and special classes within regular schools, while 8% are included in regular classrooms. The special education services manifest the same systemic trends toward school autonomy and decentralization as the general system.

The Israeli Special Education Law of 1988 and the amendments that followed, reflect a commitment to placing children in the least restrictive environment (Al-Yagon & Margalit, 2001). This commitment emphasizes the importance of providing support for pupils' special educational needs within regular education settings. Every effort must be made to minimize segregation and exclusion of those youngsters who must be referred to separate special education settings. Most of those being served in separated facilities have severe and complex disabilities. Nonetheless, even these special schools involve their pupils in social and/or academic structured activities within regular schools (Igell & Malihi, 2007).

### **There are three major patterns of mainstreaming in Israel:**

- (1) Individual placement of children with special needs in regular classes.
- (2) Special classes within regular schools.
- (3) Special schools with an orientation toward mainstreaming and community integration.

## **Study # 1: School principals' perceptions and practices with regard to the inclusion of pupils with special needs in Israel**

### **Background:**

Overall, the relatively small number of studies of principals' attitudes regarding inclusion has revealed mixed findings: some showed that they stressed the benefits of inclusion while others revealed a tendency for low expectation of success of inclusive environments (e.g. Center, Ward, Parmenter & Nash, 1985) whereas still? others (e.g. Arick & Krug, 1991) noted that principals are expected to provide major support to teachers and other staff members in implementing inclusive practices in the school.

Interestingly, findings do suggest that school principals hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion than do teachers (e.g. Forlin, 1995). Most principals felt that inclusion could work in their schools but they were not convinced that all the special needs students should be included (e.g. Barnet & Monda-Amaya, 1998). In studies that investigated views regarding success of inclusion, social success was perceived as a major goal over academic success (e.g. Downing, Eichinger & Williams, 1997). As for preferred educational placement, traditional services, namely self-contained special classes and pull-out programs, were generally favored over full inclusion (e.g. Dyal, Flynt & Walker-Bennett, 1996). Findings also show that several background variables of principals were related to the degree of their acceptance of students with disabilities such as: 1. Years of teaching experience that is, the more experience a principal has - the less acceptance was found (e.g. Barnet et al, 1998). 2. The severity of the disability- that is the willingness to include decreases as the level of the disability is more severe (e.g. Forlin, 1995). In regard to gender it should be noted that the majority of the principals in these studies were males.

In the study presented here the following two questions were examined:

1. What are the principals' perceptions of inclusion?
2. What are the principals' practices regarding inclusion?

The data regarding the two questions explored here are one part of a larger scale study (Avisar, 2003) in which data was also gathered from 181 teachers. The teachers were included in the study based on attribution theories. They were asked to provide input on principals' behaviors and school practices regarding inclusion.

## **Method**

### **Participants:**

The sample included all 205 elementary schools in the largest school district in Israel. (There are altogether 6 schools districts in the country). These schools represent a variety of schools of different sizes and characteristics as well as cities, towns and villages, in urban and rural areas. The participating schools included children with a wide range of disabilities. The most prevalent disability (over 90%), as reported by the participating principals, was students with learning disabilities followed by students with emotional and behavior disabilities.

The participating 110 elementary school principals represented 54% of the sample. They responded to a Questionnaire for Principals mailed to them with a return self-addressed stamped envelope. Of the participating principals, the majority (95%) was females, most were veteran teachers (86% with over 16 years of educational experience). Most (67%) had served as principals for at least 7 years. Over half had a Bachelor's degree and another 25% had their Master of Arts or Ph.D. degree. Over half reported that they had taken in-service courses on topics such as Implementing change, Special needs students and Inclusion. The most prevalent in-service training was related to the topic of implementing change.

**Instrument:**

A three part Questionnaire for Principals (QP):

Part I. - The School's Profile, aimed at gathering data about the school (size, staff, categories of disabilities served etc.) and about the educational placement alternatives available for students with disabilities;

Part II. – Inclusion, gathered data on inclusion as practiced in the school. It consisted of two instruments: One was a scale containing 17 statements about inclusive practices. These statements were based on a content analysis of data collected in a previous pilot study. The second instrument was developed in order to assess the principals' perception of inclusion. Six different vignettes were presented. Vignettes are known to facilitate the revealing of hidden strata of perception and thought. Each vignette described a case study based on a true story and was constructed of two parts – the first described the problem and the second offered an educational/school solution. The stories reflected three modes of inclusion – physical, social and academic. At the end of each vignette three identical questions were presented and the responses were rated on a 1-5 Likert Scale.

1. In your opinion, what is the expected academic success of this student?
2. What, in your opinion, is the expected social success of this student?
3. In your opinion, how severe is the student's problem?

The six cases were:

1. A student with a hearing impairment;
2. A student whose parents constantly interfered with school decisions;

3. A case where information from a former school was missing;
4. A student with learning disabilities who needed additional related services;
5. A first grader with limited academic readiness skills;
6. A student with learning disabilities aided by assistive technology.

Part III. Included required background information and personal data.

## Results:

### A. Principals' Perception of Inclusion:

Table 1: Principals' Perception as Reflected by the Vignettes

| <b>The main problem presented</b>                                       | <b>Inclusion mode in the vignette</b> | <b>Mean of perceived severity</b> | <b>Mean of expected social success</b> | <b>Mean of expected academic success</b> |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| A student with a hearing impairment                                     | Social                                | <b>3.12</b>                       | 3.74                                   | 3.05                                     |
| Parents' interference   | Social                                | <b>2.99</b>                       | 3.74                                   | 3.05                                     |
| Lack of Information from former school                                  | Physical                              | 2.98                              | 3.75                                   | 3.20                                     |
| A student with learning disabilities needing para-professional services | Academic                              | 2.80                              | 4.04                                   | 3.71                                     |
| A first grader with limited academic readiness skills                   | Physical                              | 2.79                              | 3.75                                   | 3.20                                     |
| A student with a mild learning disability                               | Academic                              | 2.32                              | 4.04                                   | 3.71                                     |
|   | <b>SUM</b>                            | 2.32                              | 3.83                                   | 3.31                                     |
|   | <b>MEANS</b>                          | SD .42                            | SD .47                                 | SD .40                                   |

The perceived severity of the problem: Hearing impairment was perceived as being the severest disability out of the six vignettes (mean 3.12). The problems of the other students were ranked mean 2.32.

Assessment of expected success: As evident from Table 1 the means of expected social success are higher than the means of expected academic success.

### B. Practices of Inclusion:

Following is the analysis of the responses to the 17 statements regarding models of inclusion and preferences regarding inclusion modes

Table 2: Service Delivery Models

| <b>The Models</b>   | <b>N</b> | <b>% of Schools</b> |
|---------------------|----------|---------------------|
| A special classroom | 54       | <b>58.6</b>         |

|                                     |    |      |
|-------------------------------------|----|------|
| Full inclusion                      | 28 | 25.2 |
| Pull-out for individual instruction | 24 | 21.8 |
| Pull-out for group instruction      | 19 | 17.0 |
| Related services                    | 15 | 13.4 |

These results suggest that principals stress the social aspects of inclusion over the physical and academic aspects and that they perceive that learners with disabilities are more likely to succeed socially, compared to their potential for academic success.

C. Correlations between principals’ background characteristics, perceptions of inclusion and practices of inclusion:

1. The higher the level of education of the principals, the more severe the problem was perceived.
2. Principals with a higher level of education practiced more pull-out programs.
3. The older the principals, fewer full-inclusion practices were implemented while more pull-out programs were used.
4. Principals with more in-service training in the area of inclusion practice more pull-out programs.

The results show that principals manifest a clear vision of inclusion and that their leadership behaviors promote inclusive policies. These findings have also been corroborated by teachers’ responses. Yet, while the principals are supportive of inclusive practices in their schools, findings have suggested that their support depends on the severity of the students’ disability. They view the success of inclusion as being social rather than academic. These findings coincide with data reported in similar studies in other countries

Findings however tend to raise several challenging thoughts:

The findings regarding the emphasis by principals on social success rather than on academic success is problematic. Learning and academic progress are critical for success in school and in society. From our study it is not clear whether or not the principals did not really believe in the academic outcome of inclusive practices. Could this finding be gender related? In Israel, almost all elementary school principals are women. As noted in the literature, women in leading positions tend to emphasize the social aspects of management (Greenfield, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988).

The correlations found between selected demographic variables and inclusive practices have shown that prior experience, tenure and seniority tend to affect the willingness to practice inclusive measures namely with more experience and seniority there is less support for inclusion. These findings are supported by findings in similar studies (Center, et al. 1985; Villa, Thousand, Meyers & Nevin, 1996; Barnet et al, 1998). There are several possible explanations. It may be said that since many of these principals have received their training and their initial educational experience in the pre-inclusion era, they have mixed feelings about it. It may well be that former experience is associated with age and fixed ideas (by older persons) which would explain lack of willingness to practice anything different or new.

## **Study # 2: Implementing inclusion: Signs of burnout among school principals in Israel**

### **Background:**

"One of the most widespread causes for stress in schools in Israel is the present policy of mainstreaming. Stressful situations arise both in the macro-level of the school system and the micro-level of the classroom" (Reiter, 1996, pp. 173).

### Unresolved macro-level issues:

- Changing the definition of special education from categorical to functional has not been fully implemented.
- The increase in the number of paraprofessionals working within both special and regular schools raises an issue of supervision.
- There is lack of cooperation among the three major ministries providing services for the child with special needs and his family – the Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and Education. Thus, the services are at times fragmented. The recent amendment (2003) to the Law of Special Education (1988) has not changed the fact that it is not clear which ministry is to be responsible for the allocation of funds.
- Referral committees do not always operate in accordance with the regulations.
- Government action in fulfilling the needs of the special child has not kept pace with the continual growth and development in theory and in practice by professionals and academics.

- Teachers in the regular education system are not adequately prepared for the inclusion and integration of children with special needs in their schools and in their classrooms.
- The expansion of special education services within the regular education system (special classes) has had the detrimental effect of strengthening the regular teachers' refusal to relate to the child with special needs.

Unresolved micro-level issues:

- Teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming and toward the child with special needs.
- The gap between physical integration and social acceptance by teachers and by peers.
- Stress of the non-handicapped students.
- Concern on the part of the teachers with regard to potential disciplinary issues in their classes.

**Note:** There are indeed more macro-level unresolved issues that are part and parcel of the school principal frame of reference.

**Burnout** is generally defined as a negative psychological experience that is a reaction of people to job-related stress. As such it refers to a cluster of physical, emotional and interactional symptoms. It is agreed by researchers in the field that workers' burnout is comprised of three factors: (1) Emotional exhaustion which is described as feelings of being emotionally over-extended and exhausted; (2) Reduced personal accomplishment which is experienced as decreased feeling of competence and achievement and a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively with respect to work and (3) Depersonalization which is the development of negative feelings and attitudes about the profession (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Teachers' burnout and attrition have been studied for several decades but it is only in the past two decades that scholars began to investigate the possible burnout of school principals. The literature on burnout of directors and school principals points to several factors (e.g. Gaziel, 1993; Johnson & Lindberg, 1998; Friedman, 2000): (1) A decline in principals' authority; (2) Being over-burdened; (3) Too many responsibilities; (4) Lack of job satisfaction; (5) Interpersonal conflicts; (6) Lack of professional appreciation and (7) High expectations. Sari (2004) proposes looking at burnout together with job satisfaction and points out additional predictors: the level of

interactions with students and colleagues, professional knowledge and challenges, opportunities for access to new information technology and working conditions including salary and opportunities for advancement, school structure, size of classrooms, availability of resources, educational policies and procedures and job security.

Studies looking for correlations between implementation of inclusion and teachers' attrition began to appear in the mid 90's (e.g. Forlin, 2001; Werts, Woler, Snyder & Salisbury, 1996; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997; Talmor, Reiter & Feigin, 2005). However, searching large electronic data bases for studies of principals of inclusive schools in relation to burnout or attrition yielded no results. One can therefore assume that this study is one of the first of its kind.

## **Method**

### **Participants:**

The participants were comprised of 9 female principals of elementary school, and 4 middle-school principals, 1 male and 3 females. The majority were veteran teachers (half of the participating principals have over 16 years of educational experience not including their tenure as principals). Half have served as principals for over 10 years. One just began. 75% hold a Bachelor's degree and the others have their Master of Arts or Ph.D. degree.

The schools: The schools are of different sizes and characteristics, some are in urban areas whereas others are in rural areas. The following table lists the different school by level of schooling, size and area.

Table 3: The participating schools

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Level</b> | <b>Area</b> | <b>Year Founded</b> | <b>No. of students</b> | <b>No. of teachers</b> | <b>Special class</b> |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Dror        | Middle S.    | Rural       | 1995                | 1050                   | 80                     | Center               |
| Alon        | Middle S.    | Urban       | 1988                | 711                    | 56                     | None                 |
| Psagot      | Middle S.    | Urban       | 1996                | 550                    | 45                     | 2                    |
| Hashachar   | Middle S.    | Urban       | 1982                | 660                    | 40                     | 1                    |
| Raziel      | Elementary   | Urban       | 1992                | 525                    | 38                     | None                 |
| Revivim     | Elementary   | Suburbia    | 1950                | 346                    | 22                     | None                 |
| Ganei H     | Elementary   | Rural       |                     | 338                    | 25                     | None                 |
| Hadar       | Elementary   | Urban       | 1973                | 650                    | 40                     | 1                    |
| Misgav      | Elementary   | Rural       | 1973                | 485                    | 35                     | None                 |
| Neve N      | Elementary   | Urban       | 1960                | 347                    | 25                     | None                 |
| Neve O      | Elementary   | Urban       | 1999                | 540                    | 37                     | None                 |
| Atarim      | Elementary   | Urban       | 1997                | 600                    | 40                     | None                 |

|       |            |          |      |     |    |      |
|-------|------------|----------|------|-----|----|------|
| Ganim | Elementary | Suburbia | 1985 | 458 | 30 | None |
|-------|------------|----------|------|-----|----|------|

The middle schools are in general larger than the elementary schools, which affects the number of teachers. Except for one, all the elementary schools do not have a special, self-contained class for children with disabilities. The children are all mainstreamed into the regular classes. The middle schools show a different picture.

The most prevalent disability (over 90%), as reported by the participating principals, were students with learning disabilities followed by students with emotional and behavior disabilities.

**Instruments:**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually. The initial question was: "Please tell me about the implementation of inclusion in your school". Two additional questions were: (1) "What are the difficulties encountered with regard to implementing inclusion?" and (2) "What percentage of your daily work has to do with implementing inclusion?".

Each interview lasted for about two hours. Interviews were held in the principal's office and the visits included a tour of the schools.

**Results:**

Since data analysis is still in process, the following presents preliminary results. At this stage of the analysis it is safe to say that the results concur with those of the former study with the exception of the preferred mode of inclusion. In study # 1 over half of the principals (of elementary schools) reported a preference for having a special education class whereas in study # 2, all but one reported a preference for mainstreaming in the regular class. That may have to do with implementation of inclusion. The studies are 6 years apart and changes in practices, resulting from implementation of inclusion, have occurred. Similar findings were found in another study of curricular activities of inclusive teachers (Avissar & Licht, 2007).

\* As for their difficulties and their general attitudes, no differences were found between principals of elementary schools and principals of middle schools.

\* All the participating principals regard inclusion of students disabilities as the reality of the educational scene. There was no question in their minds as to whether or not students with disabilities should be mainstreamed in the regular education system.

\* The most favoured mode of inclusion is that of "pull-out" that is, the child with disabilities studies in a regular class but is pulled out in order to receive individual help. In the elementary school level different models are being used to better utilize the resources available whereas the middle schools favour a special class over individual aides.

The difficulties involved with the implementation of inclusion from the point of view of the school principals:

- A centralized attitude of the Ministry of Education which results in much bureaucracy, very strict criteria for providing aides, frequent changes in procedures and regulations, occasionally contradicting demands and not enough autonomy for the school staff to make pedagogic decisions.
- Not enough resources i.e. teaching hours, trained special education personnel, allotment for border-line students.

*"Too many meetings, too much paper work, not enough hours to go around to cater to the needs and a supervisor who interferes with our decision making processes".*

- Parental pressure.

*"The parents have the right, by law, to interfere and disregard decisions made by the school placement committee".*

- Many children with severe behavior problems are now being included.
- Having to respond to the teachers' complaints and dissatisfaction. Not every teacher is ready and willing to take responsibility for the child with special needs.

*"One of the teachers said to me – I have been around for almost 30 years and the work only gets more and more difficult".*

Time invested by the school principal:

The principals report that a substantive part of their work has to do with the implementation of inclusion.

*"A big chunk of my time has to do with one aspect or another of implmenetation of inclusion".*

*"I find myself dealing less with the children and the teachers and more with making sure inclusion runs smoothly".*

*"Almost 50% to 80% of my time during the first 3 months of the school year and than again during the last two months of the school year is spent on implementing inclusion. During the rest of the school year it is 25%-30% of the time".*

Signs of attrition and burn-out:

The principals denied being burned-out in particular with regard to the implementation of inclusion. They resented the insinuation.

*"I don't feel tired or beat since implementing inclusion is a challenge and in my position as principal I look for challenges".*

They pointed out feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction.

*"The students who make it make me feel very pleased. It was worth it!"*

*"I can tell you about quite a number of children that we actually saved from oblivion".*

However, they all reported feelings that echo emotional exhaustion.

*"I don't feel burned-out. I feel tired".*

*"I am beat by the bureaucracy. It is time consuming and therefore very tiring.*

*Inclusion means dealing with something that is impossible for us to deal with. There aren't enough resources".*

*"I am frustrated when we cannot seem to find the appropriate answer to a child's needs".*

*"About 8% of the children in my school have special needs. I constantly feel that we do not do enough for them".*

*"I find that implementing inclusion is both frustrating and tiring".*

*"I am physically exhausted!...I am beyond tears and crying"*

**In summary:**

There are definite signs of emotional exhaustion among the school principals interviewed. At the same time, some pointed out accomplishments, that might be a source of compensation for being tired, feeling beat and frustrated. The vehement denial of the possibility of burn-out may have to do with the fact that (again) most of the principals interviewed are females.

Further content analysis is required to complete the picture.

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