Physical Inclusion Yet Curriculum Exclusion? School Staff Perceptions of the Curriculum for Students with Learning Disabilities in Mainstream Secondary Schools in Tel Aviv, Israel

Tsafi Timor Ph.D.
tsafit@bezeqint.net

Neil Burton Ph.D.
nburton@dmu.ac.uk

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Dr. Tsafi Timor

Tel-Aviv University

Dr. Neil Burton

DeMontfort University

Abstract

The Israeli education system has, over the past decade, moved towards the adoption of a more inclusive approach to meet the needs of students with identified learning disabilities. As a consequence many more students in the secondary sector (12-18) are now more willing to acknowledge that they require additional support. The main focus of this research was to assess the extent to which school staff perceives that the curriculum in secondary schools is being reasonably adjusted to meet these learning needs. The study examines the views of head teachers, counsellors and teachers in five secondary schools in Tel-Aviv area, Israel. Initially a survey was employed to assess the extent of the issue and this was then followed up with a smaller number of in-depth interviews of staff members. The analysis indicates discrepancies between attempts to broaden the curriculum offered and specific provision for students with identified learning disabilities. The paper ends with the suggestion that further research is required to assess the impact of professional development on the situation.

Introduction

Researchers (such as Slavin, 1997) agree that the inclusion of students with disabilities is one of the major school reform movements of the last century. The international commitment to inclusion was made explicit in the Salamanca World Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) that

recognised the diversity of needs but at the same time the need for accommodation within regular schools. More recently, the UN issued the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, which expresses commitment towards Education For All (EFA) - every citizen in all societies.

The ideological basis for inclusive education is the need to respond to a diversity of students in the light of social justice, equity and democratic participation (Clark et al., 1999; Barton, 1997) and as part of a wider interest in an inclusive society (Thomas, 1997; Booth and Ainscow, 1998). Indeed, the 'inclusive' approach is an international movement that advocates educating all students in ordinary classroom settings irrespective of their differences in intellectual, physical, sensory or other characteristics (Ballard, 1992). Thus, students with learning disabilities (SLD) are a legitimate identity and not a pathological condition (Slee, 1996). Therefore, the terminology of 'students with disabilities' should change to 'students with widely diverse needs' (MacKinnon and Brown, 1994). Current literature differentiates between the terms 'inclusion' and 'integration' on the grounds of the level of effectiveness (Farrell, 2001). Tod (1999: 186) makes the distinction in terms of: *'locationally integrated but not effectively included'*. Florian (in Tilstone et al., 1998) went further claiming that whereas integration is associated with the physical learning environment, inclusion is seen in terms of the quality of the learning experience that ensures that no student is denied access to educational opportunities.

Barthes (1972: 143) refers to inclusion as *'a discourse of concealment'*, whereas Slee (in Ainscow, 1991) believes that inclusion is *'an educational surgery which is merely cosmetic'* – demonstrating an awareness of possible discrepancies between rhetoric and implementation. Rose (in Florian et al., 1998) argues that a failure in the process of inclusion might achieve the opposite result: '*There are many pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools, who far from being **included** find themselves isolated by teaching approaches which fail to give adequate consideration to their individual learning needs, and thereby exclude them from a range of opportunities which would enhance their performance potential'* (p. 96).

In the past 'integrated' students were expected to *'fit the dominant mould',* and *'prove their suitability for normal schooling, rather than schools having to adapt to meet their needs'* (Sommefeldt, 2001: 157)*.* However, there is some agreement that inclusion requires *'a wide array of school-wide modifications to succeed'* (Zollers et al., 1999:162) which range from staffing and curriculum to assessment and instructional practices (Lipsky and Gartner, 1997; Skrtic, 1995). Without such modifications, Barth (1996, in Zollers et al., 1999: 158) contends that an inclusive programme is *'merely a modification of the pre-existing dual system of education and fails to meet the requirements of inclusion'.* Indeed, the work of Dryden and Vos (2001) would suggest that the educational systems in most countries would appear to have been designed to be inaccessible to and thus fail, up to 20% of the population.

The importance of allowing all students to access school curriculum as part of inclusive structures is reflected in the definition of inclusion by the DfEE:

'The participation of all pupils in the curriculum and the social life of mainstream schools; the participation of all pupils in learning which leads to the highest possible level of achievement; and the participation of young people in the full range of social experiences and opportunities once they have left school' (1998: 23)*.*

Dyson et al.'s (1994) model implies a shift towards a 'whole-school' re-structuring. Whereas 'categorical provision' advocates that learners are grouped according to their abilities or inabilities to enable the transmission of knowledge, 'responsive provision' is premised on diversity between learners, and the acquisition of knowledge is perceived as a process in which meaning is constructed through learning experiences. The shift towards the 'responsive' pole indicates a move away from categorisation. This means that SLD are not offered a curriculum that is 'tailored' for their needs, or 'remediation' of basic skills that might help them to gain access to mainstream curriculum. In addition, the concepts of

'hierarchy of knowledge' and special educational needs (SEN) are replaced by 'process of learning' and by the recognition of different styles or speed in data processing. Thus, all students are constantly exposed to a broad curricular choice, and are engaged in a process of constructing their own meaning. This shift might also involve a move from a SEN coordinator to a teaching and learning coordinator.

Clearly, according to Brookover (et al., 1982), this shift involves a 'whole-school' re-structuring alongside the recognition of individual needs. This can be seen by the move from categorical educational services (e.g. vocational education, special education classes and withdrawal support) to a unified educational system in which support would be available to any student or teacher as needed. Indeed, the acknowledgement that '*all teachers are teachers of children with special educational needs'* (Dessent, 1987: 25) determines a departure from the traditional SEN support in mainstream schools towards a 'whole-school approach' that advocates mainstream structures. This shift involves re-structuring roles and responsibilities to foster the involvement of all staff in meeting SEN.

Kelly (1999) refers specifically to what seems to be an inclusive curriculum in her 'developmental' or 'democratic' model. She criticises the current system that operates on the basis of a package of subjects on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, and recommends '*entitlement to a process of development in which all of one's potential and capacities will be cultivated and amplified to the fullest possible degree'* (Kelly, 1999: 89).

In conclusion, Bernstein (1996) states three pedagogic rights as a basis for an inclusive curriculum:

- The right to individual enhancement;

- The right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and

- personally;

- The right to participate in procedures.

The aim of the study

This study focuses on one element of school readiness for inclusive education in secondary (11-16) in Tel Aviv, Israel, namely school curriculum. It is part of a more extensive piece of research that also includes an examination of the culture and educational vision of the school. An attempt was made to examine staff perceptions of the mainstream and inclusive curricula in the context of changes to school structures. The rationale behind this choice was that the school curriculum encompasses all the educational activities that students are involved with at school. In addition, it reflects school credo, school openness towards change, and school attitude towards students with special needs. Therefore, it is considered as a major element among school structures.

Methodological Approach

As the study relies on staff perceptions, the main research approach in this study was the interpretive approach within the qualitative paradigm. However, the analysis did not rely only on participants' subjective understanding, but also on the subjective interpretation of the researcher to the responses of the staff. Miles and Huberman (1994) support this approach and argue that interpretivists have their own understandings, convictions, and conceptual orientations. LeCompte and Preissle's use of the terms of 'emic', *'where the concern is to catch the subjective meanings placed on situations by participants'* and 'etic', *'where the intention is to identify and understand the objective or researcher's meaning and constructions of a situation'* (1993: 45) also reflects the nature of this methodology*.

The initial survey provided a framework in which the main themes were explored via descriptive statistics obtained from a population of 122 respondents from the 5 randomly selected secondary schools. Personal interviews with a smaller number of staff members (28) provided the opportunity to probe the issues further. In addition, school marketing documents were examined in order to find out to what extent the issue of learning disabilities was made explicit in the process of marketing the school to potential students and their parents. The fact that these documents were not originally written on

learning disabilities matters but were used for the purpose of the research, made them 'unwitting' rather than 'witting' sources (Bell, 1987). Further, school documentation offered a means of triangulating the views of the school on matters of inclusion.

At the outset of the study, the letters A, B, C, D, and E codified schools. Their initial letters codified the three distinct research populations within them: H for head teachers, C for counsellors and T for teachers.

At the introductory session with the head teacher of each school, access to staff was formally granted, the research aim was clarified, and the head teacher was given his/her questionnaire to complete. In all five schools both head teachers and staff readily acknowledge the importance of such research. In the second stage the questionnaires were piloted to seven teachers and counsellors and fine-tuned according to their comments regarding content and style. Questionnaires were then administered in each school to twenty teachers, to two to five counsellors and to the head teacher. Most questionnaires remained anonymous except for respondents who gave their consent to be interviewed at a later stage. As expected, the collection of the questionnaires was difficult and 'contact' people in each school assisted the researcher. The response rate ranged from 75% to 90% in the different schools.

In the third stage of the study, head teachers, counsellors and teachers were interviewed. Counsellors were easier to interview than teachers because they do not teach and are more available. In addition, they usually have their own office. Teachers, on the other hand, had to be interviewed when they were not teaching. Moreover, teachers felt uncomfortable conducting interviews in the teachers' staff room. The interviewees consisted of five head teachers, eleven counsellors and twelve teachers. It usually took one meeting to complete the interview that lasted between two and three hours. However,

in some cases there was a need for a 'joining' session or for a follow-up in order to obtain some information that seemed to be missing.

The last stage of data collection was the analysis of written documents. School marketing brochures were examined in an attempt to study school attitudes and their policy regarding learning disabilities.

Findings

School curriculum

Attempts were made to gain understanding regarding the level of standardisation and flexibility of the curriculum, and school willingness to meet individual needs of students.

Findings clearly indicate that all schools are making efforts to offer 'special menus' to students and a variety of subjects. For example, BH's basic assumption is that students would choose to study subjects that they find interesting and therefore it is necessary to develop courses that encompass their perceived interests. Indeed, BH initiated an inter-disciplinary curricular model, as operated by the Junior High School, which combined subjects into the strands of Humanities, Social Studies and Sciences. The unique feature of this model was to take moral dilemmas and 'social and personal responsibility' as its core values. In school C students are offered two clusters of subjects out of which they need to choose two to four subjects. The courses comprise Cinema, Law, Business Management, National Security Studies, Biotechnology, Human Resources, and Environmental Studies. School A, too, offers unique subjects such as Communication, International Relations, and Translation Skills.

School D refers to curricular subjects in a peculiar terminology of 'languages'. The 'languages' learners can practise are: linguistic languages; the languages of creativity, of design, sciences, the Internet, marketing, of cultures, Maths, negotiation, bridging, and body language. Most of the unique subjects are related to Art: Business enterprise, Photography and Video, Advertising, Journalistic

Photography, Graphic Design, Costume Design, Sculpture, 'Three-Dimension design', Visual Media production.

School E offers 'package deals' of learning tracks such as Science-Engineering, Computers and Technology, Electronics, Social Sciences, and Industrial Management. Students must register to a pre-planned learning track and cannot choose individual courses.

Whilst these offerings may more closely match the interests of the students than a diet of 'traditional' subjects, they do not specifically provide for the diverse learning needs of the student body.

Inclusive curriculum

When headteachers were asked a series of questions to determine whether they felt that their *school should 'tailor' a special curriculum to meet the needs of SLD,* there was a high degree of ambivalence. Only CH provided an overall response that suggested a marginal degree of agreement. EH was clearly of the opinion that the curriculum should not be adapted to meet the needs of students with specific learning disabilities. The response of the head teachers would suggest that they do not feel that it is their responsibility to make special provision within the curriculum that their schools offer.

Whilst counsellors from all schools strongly felt that *school is responsible for 'tailoring' a curriculum to meet the needs of SLD,* the extent to which they perceived that their school met these needs varied significantly from school to school. In overall terms, the least satisfaction with the curricular provision was demonstrated among counsellors in school E and the highest level of satisfaction was observed among counsellors of school D. DC perceived the school curriculum as being *reasonably flexible towards LD*, EC felt that in their school it wasn't. Counsellors in schools A, B and C were generally undecided with a marginal propensity to suggest that the curriculum edged towards inflexibility. Only BC felt that their school provided anything near *adequate support for students with LD* – again, EC gave their school the lowest rating possible. DC were very positive that they (counsellors)

played a major role in providing learning support, and, to a slightly lesser extent, were BC and CC. EC continued to give their school the lowest rating possible, although they did feel, along with counsellors from all of the other schools, that the *views of students, regarding learning support, were taken into consideration* within the curricular provision.

The teachers in schools D and E were, respectively, less and more positive in their perceptions of the treatment of students with learning disabilities in their schools than their counsellors. In general, teachers did not offer any strong views, either positively or negatively, on the curricular provision for SLD, indeed there was no significant variation in views between schools either.

There is a general, albeit marginal, perception from teachers that the *school is responsible for 'tailoring' a curriculum to meet the needs of SLD,* which is not as strong as the views expressed by the counsellors. Interestingly, the only group of teachers felt, again marginally, that it was not the responsibility of the school, was DT – very different from the views of their counsellors. It can be seen that counsellors' and teachers' attitudes towards inclusive curriculum were found to be more positive than head teachers', and that in school E attitudes were found to be the lowest among all three populations.

The interviews yielded similar results and matched the findings regarding head teachers' perceptions of 'tailoring' a curriculum to match the needs of SLD, as well as the dissatisfaction reflected by counsellors and teachers from the present situation. Indeed, no special curricula for SLD are offered at present in mainstream classes in any of the schools, and staff feels dissatisfied about it.

However, the interviews identified curricular flexibility in schools A, B, and C. These schools provide English and Maths (and Computers in school C) at differentiated levels starting from the minimal level of 3 credit points, thus allowing for SLD to fit into school curriculum. It is noteworthy that the support system in these schools addresses all weak students and is not meant to address the needs of SLD in particular. For example, all weak students in the Junior High of school B get extra support while

their friends participate in the Cluster Subjects Model. In schools A and C SLD are exempt from a second foreign language (usually French or Arabic, English still being compulsory along with Hebrew) and instead they get extra help in reading comprehension skills. School C, in particular, provides extra help for the level of matriculations. Thus, instead of providing three groups in English for the upper class (the usual 3, 4, and 5 credit points) there are three more groups within the 3 credit points: a group for MABAR students (a class for low achievers), another group for SLD and a group for mainstream students. Practically it means an additional support of nine hours per week. Furthermore, last year the school approved of 1 and 2 credit points in English for the weakest of MABAR students in order to allow students to graduate with a diploma.

On the other hand, schools D and E fail to offer curricular flexibility although in school E 'slow learners' are offered less academically demanding learning tracks with built-in subjects. Findings from the questionnaires completed by head teachers and counsellors regarding perceptions of flexibility matched the interviews more closely in schools B and C whose perceptions were more positive. This might indicate that counsellors in those schools are less aware of issues of curricular flexibility because they hardly spend time in classrooms.

Discussion

The overall picture that emerges from the findings is that schools A, B, and C provide students with greater curricular flexibility. This means that students can make their own choices according to their talents, wishes and future plans. School D, too, offers a choice of 'languages' (subjects) although it seems that learners (as well as readers of school documents) find it hard to decipher the meaning of these 'languages'. School E offers learning trends that might be considered as 'package deals' in the sense that students who choose a certain learning track have to major in a cluster of subjects determined by school. However, none of these schools seems to offer individualised programmes

'tailored' to learner's needs. Therefore, what schools currently offer might be considered at best as curricular choice. In addition, this procedure of selection seems to be made randomly with little or no supervision or consultancy by school.

The current situation of curricular provision supports Kelly's (1999) first model as it mainly focuses on knowledge and content rather than on values. Only school B appeared to match Kelly's 'developmental' model, because it embedded social values and mainly social responsibility in its curricular 'menus', whereas the rest of the schools seem to dwell on the acquisition of knowledge. This assertion can be accounted for by the fact that providing knowledge per subject is much easier than developing a holistic approach which addresses students' personal development.

Another postulation that can be made on the basis of the findings relates to the fact that individual teachers are more willing to develop curricular flexibility towards SLD than head teachers. This is quite inconsistent with some researchers who contend that teachers are unable to make innovations as they are 'performers' who can perfect existing programmes (Skrtic, 1991; Weick, 1976). In a similar way, Kelly (1999) contends that teachers' freedom is restricted because of the constraints of the National Curriculum. However, the present study clearly indicates teachers' high willingness and dissatisfaction from the present situation. This gives reason to believe that they are indeed 'the make or the break' of the implementation of inclusive curriculum (Kelly, 1999; Fullan, 1993).

One-way to explain the picture that emerges from this analysis is that the Open Enrolment and the competition between schools has resulted in a shift towards student-centred educational environment. One of the implications of this shift is school curriculum. As curriculum is a major factor in the selection of a secondary school, schools offer curricular variety and flexibility in their documents although none of them has 'tailored' or modified curricula for SLD. The fact that most head teachers did

not express the belief that they were responsible for a modified curriculum for SLD might indicate that while SLD are not rejected by head teachers, they are not a top priority either

In the light of Dyson et al's (1994) model, schools have not really turned away from 'categorical' provision towards 'responsive' provision whereby school system is unified and the emphasis is placed on the process of learning rather than on achievements. Despite the advocacy in the literature towards the 'mainstream' approach (Farrell, 2000; Ballard, 1992; Norwich, 1996; Ainscow, 1997; Skrtic, 1995) and the claim that school needs to cater for all students in the pursuit of *'equity and excellence'* (e.g. Farrell, 2000: 154), students are still categorised according to their achievements and to a great extent according to their abilities as well. This 'categorical' approach seems particularly applicable in the case of SLD who, on the one hand, may be stigmatised by the identification of their learning needs, while on the other hand are not provided with any learning tools to help them develop and 'catch up' with their peers.

The study showed that teachers and counsellors demonstrated dissatisfaction from the current situation as regards curriculum for SLD. The fact that the lowest level of satisfaction was observed in school E both by counsellors and by teachers can be explained by the fact that school E demonstrated the lowest interest in inclusion of all schools and staff perceptions reflected this protest. The high level of counsellors' satisfaction in school D can be attributed to the fact that most students in this school are weak learners, and although no real curricular flexibility is made for SLD, the level of teaching is naturally more focused upon their needs and there are fewer complaints on the part of students or parents. By the same token, this might explain teachers' low level of satisfaction with the curriculum as they spend much more time in class than counsellors. At the same time, a mismatch was observed in school C between the impressive learning support that weak SLD receive from school, and the below-average levels of satisfaction of staff. This might stem from the fact that CH is a new head teacher who failed to convey her vision to staff at the time of the study, although efforts towards a flexible curriculum can be

already perceived. The highest staff satisfaction was observed in school B and this accords with BH's consistency in delivering her inclusive mission at school.

The issues of staff satisfaction from school curricular attitude towards SLD and the extent of favouring inclusive curricula appeared to be compatible. Thus, in schools where a high level of satisfaction was observed (e.g. school B), small gaps were detected between the three groups on the issue of favouring inclusive curricula. Conversely, in schools where the level of satisfaction was found to be low (e.g. school E), big discrepancies between the three groups were identified regarding their attitudes towards inclusive curriculum. Further, this analysis suggests a closed circle: once staff are satisfied from school's inclusive curriculum, they develop an improved motivation towards SLD. Contrarily, if teachers feel dissatisfied, their motivation is likely to decrease and their overall attitude towards inclusion might worsen. For example, schools B and C that demonstrated high levels of satisfaction and positive attitudes towards inclusive curricula are featured by curricular flexibility and support for slow learners. Conversely, in school E where EH's attitude towards inclusive curriculum was negative, no curricular flexibility was observed, and staff perceptions concerning curricular satisfaction were the lowest.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of the study is the discrepancies between the level of enhancement of mainstream curricula and inclusive curricula. Indeed, mainstream curricular appear to be in a state of transition in respect of offering students a wider range of 'curricular menus' out of which they can make their selection. Indeed, schools seem to move from 'old' to 'fashionable' structures, as there seems to be consent among head teachers on the need to widen the range of curricular choices for students' sake.

Yet, the study showed that no inclusive curricula are designed for SLD at this point even in schools which advocate inclusion. Therefore, it might be asserted that the development of inclusive curricula seems to fall behind mainstream curricula. Indeed, one of the implications of becoming more inclusive is that more efforts should be made to enable SLD gain access to school curriculum. This study has shown that currently SLD (?) are disenfranchised because they get neither a 'responsive' nor a 'categorical' ('remedial') provision. In fact, they are usually placed in low-ability groups that do not suit their needs.   Becoming more inclusive means that schools will need to decide on a shift from 'categorical' provision which consists of an alternative curriculum or 'withdrawal' classes towards a unified curriculum. Schools will need to allocate budgets and staff to provide remedial skills in order to compensate SLD for their deficits and eventually enable them to participate in mainstream curriculum. Alternatively, they might decide to go about 'whole-school' re-structuring of the nature of learning and teaching (Dryden and Vos, 2001) for the benefit of all students (and staff!). However, all options require a thorough training for head teachers and mainstream teachers on learning disabilities and new learning technologies that take into account improved understanding of the way learning takes place. Clearly this change will be a significant investment in training and 'retooling' of schools and consequently budgets must be allocated for this purpose.

A major element in the enhancement of inclusion is the acknowledgement that teachers are the 'make or the break' (Kelly, 1999) in curricular adaptation. Until the present moment they were expected to manage on their own with little or no support from head teachers, and with little or no SEN training at all. Yet, teachers' attitudes towards SLD and towards curricular flexibility were found in this research to be more positive than head teachers'. It is vital, then, that they be offered adequate training which will reduce their high levels of frustration and sustain their motivation to help these students.

It is proposed that further studies on school inclusive curriculum be repeated after the provision of a long-term in-service training on learning disabilities, in order to re-examine the relationship

between the issues under investigation. It is also recommended that further research be conducted in the area of school structures and inclusive structures and focus on other related issues such as 'general training offered by school' and 'specific staff training on learning disabilities'.

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