

Special education teachers perception of their self efficacy to fulfill their new roles

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Abstract

The study examined the way in which novice special education teachers perceive their self efficacy to fulfill their roles as defined by the Council of Exceptional Children. Findings show that teachers have high levels of self efficacy in prevailing and standard roles, and low levels of self efficacy in newer roles that have been added to the teacher's role in recent years, such as promoting environments in the pupil's life. The study shows the need for reorganizing the teacher training system for special education teachers which will enable graduates to fulfill their new roles efficiently.

Keywords: special education teachers, novice teachers, inclusion

In recent years the concept of "inclusion" has gained currency beyond the educational sphere, and taken on a broader definition. "Inclusion" currently denotes the attitude that society should, desirably, take toward individuals with disabilities; the term is also used in reference to human interactions as a whole.

The inclusion movement in education is part of an agenda that seeks to advance individual rights and that supports greater participation on the part of all those enrolled in general school frameworks; it advocates addressing the needs of all pupils and respecting differences of all kinds – differences of gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, intellectual capacity, health status, etc. Inclusive

education is meant to ensure that all pupils enjoy equal access to education aimed at preparing them for life in the community and in society. It is concerned with changing the system so that the needs of all children may be addressed – in contrast to the approach in which children are expected to change to fit the system (Brandon & Ncube, 2006).

The Israeli Special Education Law was issued in 1988. The Law defines the goals of special education and the basic rights of the child with special needs and his family. The law clearly states that considerations with regard to placement of the child with special needs should "give priority to placement of the child in a non special education institution." It pledges the Ministry of Education's obligations toward the child, and establishes compulsory placement procedures. The Law declares that the state is obligated to physically, mentally and instrumentally advance the child with special needs and provide him the socially required knowledge, competencies and habits in order to facilitate his entrance into society and its work places.

About 10% of Israel's approximately two million pupils have special needs. Between 80,000 to 85,000 pupils study in inclusive frameworks, whereas about 62,000 pupils attend special education frameworks.

Having special-needs children and non-special-needs children study side by side in the same educational environment, using similar curricula that have been modified to suit a variety of needs, is a

meaningful way of ensuring that pupils with special needs are exposed to the general curricula and that reciprocal relations develop between them and pupils without special needs (Purcell, Horn & Palmer, 2007).

The implementation of inclusive education demands profound changes in the organization of schools, classes, roles of the educational staff and distribution of responsibilities. Although both general teachers and special education teachers are presently coping with roles and areas of responsibility that differ from those they had in the past, special education teachers are the ones with the more challenging roles. Moreover, their role is a critical component in the success of inclusive education and providing services to children with special needs (Lamar-Dukes & Dukes, 2005). The principal change in the special education teacher's role has been in the move from working with students in smaller, self-contained academic classes or the resource room to different learning environments in the school where he or she is required to achieve goals that are more ambitious; to address a growing range of cultures, languages, learning styles, abilities and exceptions; to maintain a richer repertoire of strategies; to teach a variety of subject areas to different age groups; and to co-operate with numerous professionals (Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2010).

In light of the complexity of the special education teacher's role, the American Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) has defined a series of roles that are expected from the special education teacher. This organization is the world's leading authority on future educational trends and training professionals to work in special education. Israeli's novice special education teachers' self efficacy to comply with the CEC's standards has not yet been assessed. This is critical for un-

derstanding the importance of teacher training when preparing students to fulfill their role as special education teachers.

Method

Participating in this study were 93 new teachers taking part in special education student-teaching workshops at one teacher training college in the center of the country. The research questionnaire contained 35 items which were based on the skills identified by the CEC as being essential for special education teachers.

Results

The study's findings present two main issues: (1) The internal structure of the role perception of special education teachers; (2) The perception of the levels of self efficacy to fulfill the different aspects of the role.

The internal structure of the role perception of special education teachers.

In order to examine the internal structure of the role perception of special education teachers, we collected the 35 items of the questionnaire to seven separate categories according to theoretical considerations and our familiarity with the reality in Israel in terms of the tasks currently required of special education teachers.

The seven categories were defined and internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for each one. All the consistency coefficients pointed to a high internal reliability in each of the spheres.

- (1) Interpersonal relationships, respectful communication with pupils and their parents, trust and mutual recognition. This component also entails the pupil's cultural context and respect for his efforts at advocacy. This group reflects the public's standard perception of the special education teacher's role, which is also related to motivation for choosing the profes-

sion. It is related to altruistic perceptions deep within the teacher's own self-image. This is the heart of the special education teacher's role.

- (2) Technical aspects relating to laws, regulations, public policy, use of technology, efficient resource management, forming connections with service providers. This cluster reflects the more innovative aspects of the role of special education teacher and is more concerned with the bureaucratic and most external framework, which facilitates the role's practical implementation.
- (3) The teacher as the representative and proxy of the pupils and their families vis-à-vis the authorities in order to protect and exercise the pupil's rights and to ensure an appropriate network of services. This is also a new role that expands on the special education teacher's territory. Teachers must leave their pupil-focused occupations in favor of broader circles of support and nurturing.
- (4) Promoting the pupils' environments in which they live, supporting them and training the people who are involved with them. This is an active role that emphasizes the teacher's responsibility for educating the social and cultural groups around the child. Special education teachers develop programs for parents, families and support groups while assimilating new technologies. They are responsible for preparing programs that will ease the pupil's transition. The teacher establishes a training network to encourage an affirmative dialogue in the pupil's environment, and supports the formulation of programs for staff members both within the school and outside of it. The teacher is a figure of educational, personal and professional im-

portance for the pupil's entire support network. The teacher, in effect, designs and builds the educational-social circles, both formal and informal, around the pupil.

- (5) Promotes the vision of inclusion in the immediate community, general society and the state. This is also a new role in which the teacher is perceived as a visionary who can change broad social perceptions within the country in which he or she lives.
- (6) "Planning universal education." This subject touches on the teacher's classic role and teaching methods, however, it also involves new components relating to inclusion and differential teaching that advance all pupils, both those with special needs and those without, in a single framework. Thus, strategic teaching requiring the use of new technologies, teaching strategies that integrate curricula, developing behavioral programs for the entire class, implementing unique educational programs within the curricula, adapting to the pupils' needs by focusing on alternatives, making curricula accessible to all pupils based on their cultural, cognitive and emotional background.
- (7) Mastering cooperation skills and leadership. The teacher is required to hire staff members, to lead the staff and define its work methods. This cluster is new in terms of the teacher's responsibility for leading the staff. Thus, it is the teacher's job to define work methods based on a high ethical standard. It is also new with regard to the special education teacher's importance in the organic structure of the school and for promoting inclusion.

The perception of the level of ability to fulfill the different aspects of the role

In order to examine the way participants rank their self efficacy in each category, average scores were calculated for each category. The first sphere of developing a holistic perception received the highest average, and the lowest average was given to the fourth cluster dealing with promoting environments in the pupil's life.

The findings show that special education teachers who are first starting out perceive themselves as having a varying level of ability in the different work areas, where the highest level of ability is attributed to prevailing and standard perceptions and the lower level of ability is assigned to the newer roles that have been added to the teacher's role in recent years.

Conclusions

The importance of this study lies in the need it shows for reorganizing the teacher training system for special education teachers, which will enable graduates to fulfill their new roles efficiently, and will

give them a sense of their ability to fulfill these roles.

References

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