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Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Elementary School: Follow-Up of the Inclusion Clause of the Special Education Law

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The year 2002 saw the adoption of Amendment No. 7 to the Special Education Law – the Inclusion Law. Prior to the legislation, too, children with special needs had been included in the regular school system. The law, however, made it mandatory for the state to finance auxiliary support services that special-needs children may require within the framework of regular schools, such as various aids and forms of assistance, psychological and paramedical help. In addition, the law stipulated and elaborated the role and procedures of the Inclusion Committee, which determine the eligibility of included children for inclusion related services. The amendment mandates parental involvement and participation in the decisions of the Inclusion Committee along with their right of appeal. It further stipulates that, at the start of every school year, an individual care plan will be set for every included pupil, with parents participating in its formulation.

The implementation of the amendment began in 2003, within certain limits, whereas the supplementary funding required was made available a year later, in the 2004-05 school year.

The study attempted to provide an up-to-date picture of the basic issues involved in the area of inclusion.

2. Study Design

2.1 Study Goals
The goal of the study was to examine various aspects of the implementation of the Inclusion Clause of the Special Education Law:

- Procedural aspects, such as: the Inclusion Committee and the development of individual care plans
- Auxiliary support services: a personal classroom assistant, paramedical and psychological services etc.
- Adaptation of the school building and auxiliary equipment
- Training of teaching staff, classroom assistants and parents of included children
- Extent of parental cooperation and involvement in the inclusion process
- The social integration of children with special needs
- Difficulties and successes in the inclusion process.

2.2 Methodology
Interviews were held with key figures and decision makers in the field from the Ministry of Education and various non-profit organizations.

This was followed by an examination of different aspects of the inclusion process based on three sources of data:

- ◆ Directors of Regional Support Centers - RSCs (*Matyaot*)
- ◆ Principals of state and state-religious elementary schools
- ◆ Parents of included children in elementary school.

The study involved interviews with most of the RSC directors (53 out of 67), with a representative sample of 363 school principals and with 302 parents of special-needs children. The parents sample was assembled via non-profit organizations and parent organizations, which means that they were presumably an active, critical population, highly aware of their rights. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, their reports in many cases were consistent with the reports of the principals.

The findings relate to the period between 2006 and the end of 2007 – four years after the inclusion clause was first implemented. The main findings and recommendations for the continued implementation of the law follow.

3. Findings

3.1 Choosing a School

For about half the parents, the choice of a school for their child was based on proximity to home; about a fifth chose on the basis of the school's reputation, its willingness to include special-needs children and knowledge of the topic. Most parents reported receiving the necessary information to make a choice. About a third noted that they had required additional information, specifically about the receptiveness, experience and knowledge of the neighborhood school regarding the absorption of special-needs children. Furthermore, in citing insufficient knowledge, parents were also referring to such aspects as specific curricula and the rights of included children in school.

3.2 The Inclusion Committee

The Inclusion Clause stipulates an Inclusion Committee for every school to determine the eligibility of special-needs children for support services in light of their level of functioning and diagnoses. Nearly all RSC directors (93%) and school principals (98%) reported that Inclusion Committees were a regular feature at their schools. In parallel, most parents reported that their children had passed an Inclusion Committee.

Most principals (56%) reported that the waiting time for an Inclusion Committee was less than a month. Yet, 13% said that it was more than three months. Note that, in order to reach an Inclusion Committee, a diagnosis is required from an acceptable source. Due to the long waiting time for diagnosis, however, parents unable to pay for one privately have a longer wait.

Moreover, despite the implementation of the Inclusion Clause, there are special-needs children who do not receive suitable responses at school, according to the principals, because they do not

pass the Inclusion Committees. Of the principals, 57% pointed to a large group of special-needs children who do not apply to the Committee at all: mostly children with learning disabilities or learning disabilities in combination with Attention Deficiency Disorder (AD[H]D)and behavioral problems. The reason for this, the principals said, is either parental fear of labeling or the non-severity of a disability, which in any case would make the children ineligible for services under the Inclusion Clause.

The same problem was raised prior to the survey by key figures at the Ministry of Education. In their view, children with relatively mild disabilities have fallen between the cracks since the introduction of the Inclusion Clause as, in most cases, they are ineligible for the support services offered in the "inclusion basket" and therefore they do not bother applying to the committees.

Seventy-seven per cent of the principals and about 91% of the directors reported that an RSC representative participates in Inclusion Committees on a regular basis or in most cases. Senior officials of the education system have cited the presence of an outside professional on the Committee as especially important to help avoid conflicts of interest and contribute professionally to committee discussions and decisions reached about a child. The officials further noted that, in light of the unique contribution of RSC representatives, it is important to increase and formalize their involvement in Inclusion Committees.

3.3 The Implementation of an Individual Care Plan

Most of the parents felt that the Committee decisions about their children had been fully implemented; a quarter believed that they had not been implemented or only partially. Less than half of the parents reported that an individual school curriculum had been constructed for their children.

Principals noted that even when the Inclusion Committee decides that a child is eligible, the support is sometimes not provided fully or immediately.

3.4 Parental Involvement in the Inclusion Process

Most of the parents said that they had participated in and even influenced the decisions of the Inclusion Committee. There is, however, a caveat: as stated above, the parents concerned were a more active and involved group as they had been recruited for the survey through non-profit and parent organizations. Principals, too, reported that the parents had participated actively in the Committee decisions and did have an influence. In contrast, only 17% of the RSC directors noted that the parents had in effect influenced the Committee decisions on their children.

Another aspect of parental involvement relates to the formulation of individual curricula for included children. About two-thirds of the RSC directors and school principals said that the parents had virtually not been involved. Most of the parents who had been involved, expressed great satisfaction or satisfaction with the process. The RSC directors and the principals stressed the need to increase parental involvement in this area.

3.5 Counseling Parents

It appears that parents receive little guidance during the inclusion process: less than a third of the parents said that they had been counseled on relevant topics by either RSC professionals or parent organizations during the process of their children's inclusion at school. Those who did receive guidance said that it had generally been limited to a single meeting in the course of the year. About a quarter of the latter noted that they had received an explanation about the Inclusion Committee; about a third noted that they required additional information or further counseling on various topics.

3.6 Training the Teaching Staff

Apart from the need to guide parents, the study examined whether there was a need to train school staff (principals, teachers and personal classroom assistants) in various aspects of inclusion. Most of the RSC directors and school principals believed that class teachers always or usually knew what course to take if a problem arose concerning an included child. Nevertheless, they reported a need for counseling and guiding teachers about specific disabilities, especially ADD and behavior problems (96% of RSC directors and 84% of school principals), and about severe learning disabilities (84% of the principals).

Training programs do exist, developed by the RSCs or the Regional Pedagogic Centers of the Ministry of Education. These are delivered by RSC counselors at the schools, where they conduct seminars or hand out material. Yet, as reported by RSC directors and school principals, the main participants of these programs appear to be special education teachers: only 26% of the principals reported that regular teachers had participated in the in-service training even though they are the ones who most need it. Both the directors and principals reported that there was in-service training for multi-disciplinary school staff in which regular teachers did sometimes participate. It is important to reinforce the training component especially for those disabilities for which the RSC directors and school principals voiced a great need.

There is also a need to train the personal classroom assistants: 65% of the principals who reported that their schools had assistants, noted that they received no training from the school.

In common with most of the principals, most of the parents believed that, in general, the class teacher could cope ably with the special needs of their child and the typical problems of children with this type of disability. Most parents (three-quarters), however, considered the teacher's knowledge and training to be partial. Perhaps, though a class teacher's formal knowledge and training may be limited, she manages to cope with a child's special needs on a daily basis due to her personal qualities or general pedagogic experience.

3.7 Auxiliary Support Services

According to the principals, services such as a psychologist, school advisor, remedial teaching and personal classroom assistance are available in most schools. More than half of the principals

noted that their schools offered art therapy as well. Slightly less than a third reported having paramedical services, such as occupational therapy and speech therapy, at their schools.

Parents of included children were asked to note the receipt of any service and its adequacy. If their children were ineligible for a particular service, they were also asked whether they needed it in any case. About two-thirds of the parents said that the overall support their children received at school was inadequate. For instance:

◆ More than half of the parents said that their children required scholastic assistance at school, but received no such help

◆ More than half of the parents whose children did receive auxiliary services at school reported that the service provided (e.g., remedial teaching, scholastic assistance and paramedical treatments) was insufficient.

Parents listed a number of reasons for their children not receiving help at school. Among other things:

◆ Over half cited the school's lack of funds.

◆ About a fifth of the parents cited bureaucratic barriers and difficulties with the receipt of classroom assistance and the limitations of the school Inclusion Basket.

As a result, more than half of the parents relied on extra out-of-school support services, such as afternoon paramedical treatments. Some of these services are funded within the framework of the National Health Law; some are private.

Personal classroom assistance is one of the most important of the many auxiliary services. More than half of the parents reported that their children received classroom assistance following the decision of the Inclusion Committee and on the scale it had determined. Personal assistance is provided mainly for children with severe disabilities: autism or Asperger syndrome, retardation or Down's syndrome, visual impairment or physical disabilities. Most of the interviewees who reported that their children had a personal assistant were very satisfied with the service although less than half considered her training adequate. Some families reported that they independently provided training for the assistant since no other party had adequately trained her.

3.8 Auxiliary Equipment and Adapting the School Building
There is apparently a shortage of auxiliary equipment for the inclusion of special-needs children in a large portion of the schools. A high percentage (45%) of RSC directors reported that only a small portion of the schools had auxiliary equipment. Without suitable equipment, the inclusion of special-needs children cannot be successful. Nearly all of the principals reported a need for such equipment as laptops, audiovisual aids, communication gear, special chairs and Braille books. The findings of the parents survey also attested to a shortage of auxiliary equipment: about a fifth noted that their children did not receive the necessary equipment from school.

According to reports of more than 70% of the principals, inclusion demanded at least one change in the physical structure of the school (i.e., ramps, elevators and WCs for the handicapped). Moreover, it appears from the parent reports that in most cases, the structural adjustments required at school for inclusion purposes were unavailable.

3.9 Resistance to Inclusion from School Staff

Another aspect deserving of mention relates to the initial resistance to inclusion by school staff. More than half the parents noted that they had met with a school's refusal to include their children and that the school had agreed only after they had exerted pressure. One interesting finding from the surveys of RSC directors and school principals relates to the types of disability that aroused considerable opposition from principals and teachers. Some 79% of the directors reported opposition by teachers and principals to include children with ADD and behavioral problems, while 45% of the principals reported such opposition. With respect to other disabilities, only a small percentage of interviewees noted that they aroused opposition. Finally, some 15% of the RSC directors noted that autism, Asperger, retardation and Down's syndrome also aroused opposition to inclusion from principals and teachers.

3.10 Social Integration

Nearly all the parents reported that they had not encountered opposition to inclusion from the parents of other children in the school. In the estimation of most parents, the class teachers made an effort to help their children socially integrate in the classroom and the school tried to help them participate in school social events.

Nevertheless, there were still reports of problems relating to the social integration in school of special-needs children. More than two-thirds of the parents noted that the other children had not been prepared in advance for the inclusion of the special-needs child despite the fact that the literature cites this as an important element of inclusion.

The findings also revealed that the extent of social integration varies with the type of disability. RSC directors and school principals reported that children with visual, hearing and physical impairments integrated socially to a far greater extent than children with autism, Asperger, retardation or Down's syndrome. There is thus a need to find ways to enhance the social integration of this latter group by, for example, preliminary preparation of the classroom. Principals also noted that pupils with severe learning disabilities integrated socially to a far greater extent than children with ADD and behavioral problems.

3.11 Differences in Various Aspects of Inclusion by Type of Disability

Significant differences were found in various aspects of inclusion by type of disability: the extent of necessary staff training, of resistance to inclusion by teachers and other class parents, and of the child's social integration.

As stated, children with ADD and behavioral problems find it particularly hard in the classroom in terms of both the teacher's coping and their own social status in the class. Note that 39% of the

principals said that the most problems are aroused by the inclusion of children with behavioral disorders.

According to the RSC directors and school principals, the need for training was greatest with respect to the inclusion of children with ADD and behavioral problems. Teachers have insufficient knowledge and tools to deal with these children who may be disruptive in class in contrast to children with other disabilities who may require less of the teacher's attention during a lesson. Furthermore, the inclusion of these children arouses the most opposition from teachers and other parents, according to the directors and principals.

The findings thus reveal that included children in regular schools suffering from ADD or behavioral problems require special attention from program planners of education interventions. The findings also reveal a need to help teachers who have such children in their classrooms by providing training, support and effective coping techniques. Guidance for teachers may help diagnose children with ADD and, subsequently, supply teachers with new, more effective teaching methods to cope with the phenomenon. This proved to be the case in a study of the Idud program.[1]

3.12 Inclusion in School – Benefits and Difficulties

In response to an open question of what the school gained from inclusion, most principals noted a social contribution: the benefit to the general social atmosphere at school (45% of the interviewees) and to children without disabilities, including education towards acceptance of the other and tolerance (46%). This type of social change marks one of the main aspirations of the Division of Special Education at the Ministry of Education.

More than 82% of the principals cited the addition of financial resources as most important to the school's needs for the success of inclusion.

Among the prominent difficulties cited were the added burden on classroom teachers, disruption to class management, lack of adequate financial resources and a decline in the general scholastic level of inclusion schools.

3.13 General Evaluation of Inclusion

Despite the abovementioned difficulties, most parents assessed the process of their children's inclusion as successful to a very great or great extent. More than half cited a number of problems with the process. Most pointed to a lack of training of school staff or problems of social integration.

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[1] Sharon, A.; Chesner, S.; Ornoy, A.; Strosberg, N.; Wilensky, D.; Naon, D. 2008. *Idud ("Encouragement") Program to Treat Children with ADHD at Four Jerusalem Schools: Executive Summary of an Evaluation Study*. ES-26-08 (Heb)

The most common recommendations for improvement of school inclusion, made by parents, related to the professional training of the staff. This was followed by the provision of more support services, assistance with social integration and physical adaptation of the school building to the needs of the child. Some parents noted that the education system as a whole is insufficiently aware of the importance of inclusion and inadequately prepared for the inclusion of special-needs children. About a quarter of the respondents cited a lack of resources to promote and improve the school inclusion process. Slightly less than a quarter of the parents said that, to assure the success of inclusion, they themselves had to be highly involved in the process. The same issues, as noted, were raised by the directors/principals.

3.14 Comparison of Jewish and non-Jewish Sectors, and of the Center and the Periphery

The directors and principals reported differences between the Jewish and non-Jewish sectors that reflect insufficient support services, auxiliary equipment, physical/structural adaptations, and training/support of teachers and classroom assistants. For example, interviewees in the non-Jewish sector reported a greater need for physical adjustments to the building and a greater lack of support services than their Jewish counterparts.

In addition, the principals in the Arab sector reported a greater extent of opposition to inclusion than in the Jewish sector. Principals in the non-Jewish sector tended to report passive participation by parents in the Inclusion Committees and less readiness by teachers for inclusion. Yet more principals in the Jewish sector reported negative repercussions of inclusion, such as overburdening teachers and disruptions to class management, as well as detriment to the scholastic level and violent behavior resulting from the inclusion of special needs children in regular schools.

Other differences were found between the center of the country and the periphery. More principals in peripheral communities indicated a need for additional auxiliary equipment, teacher training and support services. They also reported little or very little readiness by teachers for inclusion compared with the center of the country.

3.15 Coordination and Cooperation of Inclusion Agents

The overriding majority of principals pointed to the cooperation of all professionals working with the children ("always" or "in most cases"). They said most schools had a position of inclusion coordinator who served as a liaison between the schools and the RSC.

Nevertheless, there was not always a clear division of responsibility and authority between special and regular education. As one senior education figure noted, the personnel of regular education often considered the included children to be the responsibility of special education (the RSC), whereas the RSC related to them as regular pupils and the school's responsibility. The attitudes of the education personnel sometimes stem from a lack of knowledge by teachers as to how to approach included children. This topic can certainly be handled by providing more guidance and training for teachers and principals.

4. Conclusions

The implementation of the Inclusion Clause poses a highly significant challenge to the education system since it applies to all schools across the board. It is thus to be expected that the full implementation of the Clause warrants a long-term process. The findings presented in the report are an important dimension in the implementation of the Inclusion Clause and constitute a significant basis for promoting the process.

The findings of the follow-up study reveal that all the regulations and procedures of the Clause are in place, such as Inclusion Committees and the construction of individual curricula. The findings of the study and the discussions held with representatives of the Ministry of Education give rise to three main conclusions:

♦ There is a need to enhance parental involvement, particularly in the preparation of care plans. It is also important to encourage them to take a more active part in the Committees, especially in the Arab sector

♦ There is a need to place more emphasis on training for teachers to prepare them for the inclusion of special-needs children, especially regarding ADD, behavioral problems and learning disabilities

♦ There is a need to encourage an atmosphere of inclusion in the schools and to develop mechanisms and standards to implement inclusion in the schools. This change requires a complex process of persuading both teachers and principals of the importance of inclusion and preparing inclusion classes in anticipation of accepting special needs-children, in order to enhance their social integration.

The study provided the Ministry of Education with critical feedback for the continued implementation and improvement of inclusion. The findings were presented to the director general of the Ministry of Education, to senior staff in charge of inclusion in the regular and special education systems, to representatives of the Psychological Services and to representatives of School Supervision.

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