

## **Changes in Teachers' Curricular Activities and Perception of Their Role as a Result of the Mandate to Include Children with Special Needs in Regular Classes**

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### **Abstract**

One of the mandates of the Israeli Special Education Law (1988) is to include students with special needs in regular classes. The "Inclusion Plan" has been implemented gradually since 1996/1997 school year and by the year 1999/2000 it is implemented in schools all over Israel. The concept of inclusion promotes acceptance of all students and a willingness to restructure the school curriculum in response to their needs (Kavale, 2000; Snyder, Garriot, & Aylor, 2001). It also refers to support systems and to interpersonal and social integration. Key factors in inclusion include adaptation of instruction, restructuring of classes and effective use of existing resources. Definitions of curriculum and curricular activities vary but all are characterized by the interplay between instruction and curriculum. Looking at curricular activities in special education reveals that it focuses on methods of instruction, learning strategies and acquisition of basic skills (Clark, 1994; Adams & Stout, 1995). In Israel the inclusive teacher is required to prepare an Individual Education Plan for each student with special needs.

The objectives of the present study were threefold. Firstly, to identify the changes in teachers' curricular activities as a result of the mandate to include children with special needs; secondly, to review the change in role perception of teachers in an inclusive school; and lastly, to focus on implications for teachers' training for inclusive education. The results showed that: teachers in inclusive classrooms emphasize individual planning and curricular adaptations. Besides, the development of interdisciplinary teams in inclusive schools has a bearing on how teachers perceive their role; and there is evidence of more collaboration between teachers. This last finding has a bearing on teacher training, in particular a move collaborative training programs.

### **Background**

The concept of inclusion promotes acceptance of ALL students and willingness to restructure the school curriculum in response to their needs (Villa & Thousand, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sebba & Ainscow, 1996; Kavale, 2000; Snyder et al., 2001). Teachers' support of mainstreaming/inclusion<sup>1</sup> is critical to the success of inclusive

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<sup>1</sup>The terms mainstreaming and inclusion are used interchangeably. Both refer to the situation where children with disabilities spend at least part of the school day in a regular class. The term student with disabilities refers to children of school age who

school programs since it will influence the effort they extend in its implementation. In the final analysis it is the teacher's perspective and the teacher's role perception that has instructional implications. Key factors in inclusion include a supportive school leadership, support systems for staff and pupils, collaboration of teachers and other staff members, curricular modifications, adaptation of instruction, restructuring of classes and effective use of existing resources (Sands, Adams, & Stout, 1995; Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Ainscow, 2000).

The study reported in this paper adds to the existing knowledge base in regard to teachers' practices in inclusive settings by focusing on curricular activities and practices of teachers in inclusive settings in schools in Israel.

### **Setting the context**

Definitions of curriculum and curricular activities and practices vary but all are characterized by the interplay between instruction (the "how") and curriculum (the "what") (Marsh, 1992; Eisner, 1998; Bartlett, Burton, & Peim, 2001). Following traditional models of curriculum planning (Tyler, 1969) three stages of curricular practice are recognized: Planning, which includes devising the plan of instruction; Executing, which includes methods of instruction; and Evaluation, which includes ways and ways for evaluation and assessment.

Research related to curriculum implementation and curricular practices in special education and in inclusive settings focuses on methods of instruction, learning strategies, acquisition of basic skills and involvement in preparing and IEP for each student (Stainback & Jackson, 1992; Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 1992; Giangreco, 1992; Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995; Sands et al., 1995; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 2000; Stump & Bigge, 2001).

Provision of education<sup>2</sup> in the State of Israel is governed by three major laws: Compulsory Education Law (1949), State Education Law (1953) and Special Education Law (1988). The latter has been recently amended to emphasize the mandate to include children with special needs in general education that is, regular schools and general classes. (Table 1 in Appendix I presents the legal basis of education in the State of Israel). Special Education<sup>3</sup> in Israel is provided in special kindergartens, special schools, special (self-contained) classes within regular schools and extra curricular programs.

Mainstreaming of students with disabilities into regular classrooms has been practiced in Israel on a voluntary basis for the past four decades. It became mandatory following Special Education legislation that not only supported on-going practices but

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have been diagnosed as having difficulties in performing school tasks. Their educational placement, whether in an inclusive or a special educational setting, has been determined by a pedagogical committee appointed by the Special Education Dept. within the Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> The education system in Israel functions as follows: Pre School (K) – 3 – 6 years of age, Elementary school 1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 6 – 12), Middle school 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 12 – 15). Where there is no Middle school, Elementary school go up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (14 years of age). High school 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 16- 18) or 9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 15 – 18). In the 2000/20001 school year 1,600,000 pupils were enrolled in educational facilities under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

<sup>3</sup> In the 2001-2002 school year, a total of 39,000 pupils were enrolled in special education facilities. In addition, about 30,000 pupils were included in regular classes and received educational assistance.

also echoed commitments and concerns of legislators and educators around the world. (Stephens, Blackhurst, & Magliocca, 1988; Yell, 1998; Kavale, 2000). One of the major mandates of the Israeli Special Education Law is to include students with special educational needs in regular classes as stated in the Circular of the Director General of the Ministry of Education : “One of the main cornerstones of the Israeli educational system is its commitment to respond to the educational needs of all students and in particular to those students with learning difficulties, in inclusive rather than exclusive settings.....most of the exceptional students can and should be included.....students with disabilities will benefit from inclusion socially and academically alike”. (Circular 58/9, May, 1998; p.5) By the 1998-99 school-year it became mandatory for all schools in Israel to practice inclusion. (Reiter, Schanin, & Tirosh, 1998; Leyser & Ben-Yehuda, 1999; Leyser, 2002).

In order to achieve this goal the Ministry of Education devised a “Plan for Inclusion” aimed at reducing the numbers of students in special classes and schools and increasing the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes<sup>4</sup>. The following step stones describe its development:

- A. 1990/1 – 1995/6    planning and devising special education services for included pupils
- B. 1996/7 – 1998/9    shaping the practice –    the formative years
- C. 1999/0 on -        implementation

By the year 2000 the Plan for Inclusion was implemented in schools all over Israel, particularly at the elementary level.

### **The methodology**

Set within this context of policy development in Israel, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were the changes in teachers' curricular activities, within regular schools, as a result of the mandate to include children with special needs?
2. What were the changes in role perception of teachers in an inclusive school?
3. What are the implications for teachers' training?

Data were collected by pre-service special education trainees as part of the requirements in an undergraduate course titled: ‘Inclusion of students with special needs in general education’. The interviews lasted about one hour each. Most of them took place in the teachers' lounge during the school day (teachers in Israel do not have their own rooms). The interviewers were instructed to use a leading question about curricular practices as related to inclusion. Detailed protocols were recorded.

Data collection spanned over 6 years, beginning in the school-year 1996/7 and ending in the school year 2000/1. Thus, it provides an opportunity to observe a process

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<sup>4</sup> The largest target population for this plan is children with learning disabilities. Their academic performance is dependent on curricular and instructional adaptations and they previously were assigned to self contained special classes or to special schools.

beginning during the formative years of The Plan for Inclusion and ending at the stage of implementation.

A total number of 165 teachers participated in the study. The following table presents the breakdown of the sample by period with regard to The Plan for Inclusion and by type of educational setting – general school or special school.

Table 2: The Sample

Period	Formative years 96-99	Implementation 00-01	Total
Teachers in general schools	53	76	129
Teachers in special education schools*	13	23	36
Total	66	99	165

\* This paper refers only to the 129 teachers in general education and excludes the teachers in special education schools.

Table 3 presents the background data of the participating teachers:

Table 3: Teachers' background data

		N=129	%
<b>Education:</b>	Certified	22	17
	B.A./B.Ed.	93	72.2
	M.A.	13	10
	Missing value	1	0.8
<b>Area of Education:</b>	Special Education	87	67.4
	General Education	16	12.4
	Missing value	26	20.2
<b>Experience:</b>	0 – 5 years	21	16
	6 - 12 years	48	37.2
	13 – 29 years	30	23.3
	over 20 years	30	23.3
<b>Background knowledge in Curriculum:</b>	None	34	26.3
	During pre-service	44	34.1
	In-service courses	50	38.7
	Missing value	1	0.8
	Role of "Inclusion Teacher" <sup>5</sup>	34	26.4

Most of the participating teachers (72.2%) have a Bachelor degree in Education. Of these, well over half (67.4%) had been trained in Special Education. Over one third (37.2%) were at the beginning of their teaching career (6 – 12 years) and almost half (46.6%) were veteran teachers (over 12 years of teaching experience). Well over half (72.8%) of the participating teachers claimed to have knowledge in the area of

<sup>5</sup> The Inclusion Teacher is responsible for carrying out the IEP. She works exclusively with pupils with special educational needs, mostly outside of the classroom.

curriculum planning and implementation. This was acquired either during in-service training (38.7%) or during their initial teachers' training (34.1%). Since 26.4% of the participating teachers reported to be Inclusion Teachers, it follows that the rest 73.6% are general teachers in the regular class.

Five steps of content analysis were carried out using internal categorization as well as external categorization<sup>6</sup> in the following manner:

Step I: Since the background data collected was an integral part of the interview, the first step of analysis aimed at identifying the sample. At the same time, statements referring to role perception were separated from the other statements.

Step II: (Internal categorization). In order to identify recurring themes, the authors coded relevant units of the texts. This procedure yielded two main categories based on unanimous agreement among judges (the authors). These were: 1. Curricular practices; 2. Instruction in an inclusive setting.

Step III: The main categories were broken down into sub-categories as follows – the first category (Curricular practices) yielded two themes: Sources for curricular planning and the participants in the planning process. The second category (Instruction in an inclusive setting) yielded three themes: Existing models of inclusion; Ways and methods of instruction in inclusive settings and assessment and evaluation of the included pupil. Each sub-category was further analyzed as to the particular components. (Table 4 which follows presents the final breakdown). Statements pertaining to role perception of the teacher were separated earlier (Step I).

Step IV: (External categorization). The statements referring to role perception were coded utilizing categories suggested by Zilberstein (1984) as follows: The Chooser (the teacher chooses appropriate materials and teaching tools from existing materials and tools); The Developer (the teacher develops his/her own materials in accordance with curricular requirements and the needs of the pupils) and the Creator (the teacher creates and develops his/her own curriculum). Appendix II presents a table (Table 10) which summarizes the breakdown into categories and sub-categories.

Step V: Statistical procedures were carried out to determine possible correlations between the categories and the different groups of teachers.

## **Results**

The study set out to identify the changes in teachers' curricular practices as a result of the mandate to include students with special needs in the regular classes. Curricular activities in this study include curricular practices and ways and methods of instruction. The first include the sources for curricular planning and information in regard to the participants in the planning process. The results are presented by each of the sub-categories. In each table the N refers to the number of participants who had made that statement. It needs to be taken into consideration that under each category a teacher may have referred to more than one sub-category.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (1990), internal categorization refers to the actual, authentic contents of a text while external categorization refers to categories based on research literature.

**Changes in curricular activities:** The following three tables present the results with regard to curricular activities (Table 5 and Table 6) and with regard to instruction (Table 7). The data is presented to reflect the changes between the period of the formative years and the period of implementation.

Table 5: Sources for curricular planning

	<b>"formative years" 96-99 N=53</b>		<b>"implementation" 00-01 N=76</b>		<b>Significance P</b>
	N	%	N	%	
<b>Diagnosis and assessment</b>	12	22.6	19	25	0.758
<b>The student's IEP</b>	10	18.9	47	61.8	<b>0.000</b>
<b>The requirements of the subject's curriculum</b>	23	43.4	54	71.1	<b>0.002</b>
<b>Learning materials</b>	20	37.7	52	68.4	<b>0.001</b>
<b>The class curriculum</b>	10	18.9	47	61.8	<b>0.000</b>

The statistically significant differences found in the data show that instituting inclusion resulted in a substantial rise in using different sources for curricular planning, sources other than diagnosis and assessment. There is almost four times more reliance on the IEP and on the class's study plan and two times more reliance on the requirements of the general curriculum in teaching subject areas and on learning material.

Table 6: The participants in the planning process

	<b>"formative years" 96-99 N=53</b>		<b>"implementation" 00-01 N=76</b>		<b>Significance P</b>
	N	%	N	%	
<b>The teacher plans on her own</b>	39	73.6	21	27.6	<b>0.000</b>
<b>The Special Education Team</b>	16	30.2	53	69.7	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Parents</b>	2	1.9	13	17.1	<b>0.006</b>
<b>Students</b>	0	0	3	3.9	0.143
<b>The homeroom teacher</b>	12	22.6	46	60.5	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Other teachers</b>	6	11.3	34	44.7	<b>0.000</b>

The significant differences found indicate very clearly that there was a shift toward team planning and involvement of additional teachers in the process of curricular planning. It is unfortunate that the students have no part in the planning process and the parents have a very small part, even though it is slightly larger in latter years than prior to implementation.

Table 7: Ways and methods of instruction

	<b>“formative years” 96-99 N=53</b>		<b>“implementation” 00-01 N=76</b>		<b>Significance P</b>
	N	%	N	%	
Relying on teacher’s own pedagogic repertoire	26	49.1	49	64.5	0.081
Making use of teaching tools	21	39.6	5	6.6	<b>0.000</b>
Collaborative planning	0	0	3	9.6	0.143
Curricular adaptations	25	47	22	28.9	<b>0.034</b>

Significant differences in the data show that the curricular adaptations are used in moderation but there is a decline in latter years just as there is a decline in using specific teaching tools for the included students. A few teachers mentioned collaborative planning in the latter period whereas none referred to it beforehand.

Although it is not a statistically significant difference, it is worthwhile to note that in latter years more and more teachers in inclusive settings speak of their own pedagogic repertoire as an important source in the instruction process.

Assessment is a part and parcel of curricular activities however, in this study the number of statements pertaining to assessment and evaluation practices recorded in the interviews was too low to be analyzed.

**Changes in role perception:** The following table presents the results with regard to role perception. The data is presented to reflect the changes between the period of the formative years and the period of implementation.

Table 8: Role perception

	<b>“formative years” 96-99 N=53</b>		<b>“implementation” 00-01 N=76</b>		<b>Significance P</b>
	N	%	N	%	
<b>The Chooser</b>	22	41.5	62	81.6	<b>0.000</b>
<b>The Developer</b>	21	39.6	21	27.6	0.153
<b>The Creator</b>	5	9.4	16	21.1	0.079

The statistically significant differences found in the data point to a higher level of involvement on the part of the teacher in choosing appropriate learning materials and curricula for the included student. There is also a rise (although not statistically significant) in creating the teacher’s own curricula.

**Additional information:** The data collected included the following information regarding the models of inclusion existing in the different schools:

Table 9: Existing models of inclusion

	<b>“formative years” 96-99 N=53</b>		<b>“implementation” 00-01 N=76</b>		<b>Significance P</b>
	N	%	N	%	
<b>A self-contained classroom</b>	32	60.4	22	28.9	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Assistance in the regular class</b>	14	26.4	22	28.9	0.752
<b>“Pull-out” for assistance</b>	10	18.9	10	13.2	0.378

The significant differences found reflect the decline in the number of special education classes within regular schools. “Pull-out” is for a short period of time and the child is an integral part of the general, regular class. Even though it is not a statistically significant finding, there is a slight rise in assistance given inside the class and a slight decline in assistance given outside of the class.

### **Discussion**

The following statistically significant changes can be noted as a result of the mandate to include children with special needs in the regular classes: It seems that The Plan for Inclusion succeeded in reducing the numbers of students in special settings within general education. It follows that there are more students with special needs included in regular classes. It is not surprising then, that so many (67.7%) of the teachers in this study were initially trained in special education. It is safe to assume that the school principals prefer to place them in inclusive classes.

The significant differences found indicate a wider variety of sources for curricular practices. Most important, there is evidence of more collaboration among school staff. Collaboration is mentioned during the planning process as well as during instruction. There is more team planning and more involvement of different teachers, alongside the special education teacher, in planning for the included student. The special education teacher, now called the Inclusion Teacher, is not alone anymore. The teacher is part of a team and thus a part of the school staff. Inclusion is meaningful not only to the students but to the teachers as well. Much has been written about collaboration as a model for successful mainstreaming (e.g. Simpson & Smith-Myles, 1993; Voltz, Brazil, & Ford, 2001). This study points out that it is a necessary mode of operation, almost “grass roots” in nature.

As for instruction, the finding that the teacher’s own pedagogic repertoire is more prevalent tends to suggest that the inclusive teachers are more confident in teaching students with special needs. This new confidence is also reflected in the changes in role perception as 81.6% of the teachers reported activities that include choosing appropriate learning materials for the included student.

The rise in reporting on creating curricula (even though it was not found to be statistically significant) may have to do with the involvement of the teachers in the IEP and in the planning teams.

The references to assessment procedures with regard to the included student were too few to analyze. This finding raises a serious question with regard to the grading of the included student and calls for further research.

### **Implication for teachers' training**

The results of this study have an important bearing on teachers' training both for special education and for general education. Special Education departments in teachers training programs have to take into account the new roles of the special education teacher, i.e. teaching alongside the general teacher, working collaboratively with other staff members, having to have a sound knowledge base in some subject areas to be able to teach content and not just skills, carrying out the role of consultant to the general teachers regarding instruction to included students (Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003). Alongside pre-service training, in-service programs should be devised to make it possible for veteran teachers with special education training to function properly in this new era of inclusive schooling.

At the same time, General Education pre-service and in-service training has to consider altering the programs so that they include a sound knowledge base in instructional accommodations, in assessment alternatives, in planning and working collaboratively with other staff members, in carrying out their instructional duties cooperatively with the special education teacher. Existing general education training programs have to contribute to a change in attitude of student teachers to becoming truly accepting of all students whether or not they have special educational needs. These are not new ideas. In the past few years, the discourse in special education teacher training focused on two main issues: one has to do with the necessary knowledge base for special educators to work in inclusive settings (e.g. Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 1996; Fisher et al., 2003) and the other examines the issue of a unified general and special education training program versus the infusion of special education content courses into general education training (e.g. Griffin & Pugach, 1997; Stayton & McCollun, 2002).

This study has several limitations: the sample is random and therefore might be biased. Most of the teachers interviewed were mentors of the student teachers who conducted the interviews. It stands to reason that they may not be the typical inclusive teacher but are more dedicated to the idea of mainstreaming to begin with and see themselves as role models to the student teachers. Data collection was done using only one type of qualitative measure. The data reflected teachers' testimony with no corroboration via observations. Further research should be based on more carefully constructed sample and should employ observations, analysis of learning materials and the like.

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## Appendix I:

**Table 1: Legal Basis of Education in Israel**

Compulsory Education Law (1949)	All children between the ages of 5 (compulsory kindergarten) and 15 (grade 10) inclusive, are provided with free education.
State Education law (1953)	Regulates a six-day school week and determines the content and procedures of State Education.
Special Education Law (1988)	States the purpose of special education for students between the ages of 3 and 21.
Special Education Law (Amendment) (2002)	States the provisions for inclusion

## Appendix II:

The following table presents the final breakdown of categories and sub-categories.

**Table 10: Breakdown of categories following content analysis:**

Categories	Sub-categories		Stages of curricular practice
Curricular practices	Sources for curricular planning	Diagnosis and assessment	Planning
		The student's IEP	
		The requirements of the subject's curriculum	
		Learning materials	
		The class's plan of study	
	Participants in this planning process	The teacher plans of her own	
		The Special Education Team	
		Parents	
		Students	
		The homeroom teacher	
		Other teachers	
Instruction in an inclusive classroom	Ways and methods	Leaning on teacher's own pedagogic repertoire	Executing
		Making use of teaching aides	
		Collaborative planning	
		Curricular adaptations	
	Assessment	Assessment and evaluation	Assessment
	Existing models of inclusion		
Role perception			

