



Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Background

In 2018, Israel adopted an amendment to the Special Education Law (Special Education Law – Amendment No. 11, 2018). The amendment reflected a change in perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education settings. It defined special education as a service (“special education services”) that can also be provided within regular classroom settings, rather than as a place or designated framework (special education schools or special education classes within regular schools). Given the time that has passed since Amendment No. 11 and the implementation of inclusion processes, the Ministry of Education asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine these processes in primary and middle schools. This report focuses on primary schools due to insufficient response rates in middle schools.

Research Objective

The objective of the study was to examine inclusion implementation, its challenges, and the needs of the staff engaged in promoting inclusion and their attitudes toward inclusion. The study aims to inform policymakers in developing a comprehensive program to strengthen the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular primary education.

Methodology

The study employed quantitative and qualitative tools:

- **Ten semi-structured interviews** conducted between January and June 2023 with school and municipal staff; and **a focus group** with seven special education teachers in inclusion settings (hereafter: special education teachers) held in July 2023. The interviews and focus group were the preliminary stage of the study and were intended to serve as a basis for developing the structured survey questionnaires, rather than as a basis for an independent qualitative analysis.

- **Online surveys** which were distributed to school principals, inclusion coordinators, homeroom teachers, special education teachers, and school counselors. Low response rates in middle schools led to their exclusion from the report. Although response rates in primary schools were also limited, methodological adjustments were applied to address potential response bias.

Key Findings

- **Characteristics of the educational staff:** 28% of respondents reported no experience in working with children with disabilities; 22% of the special education teachers lacked formal training in special education.
- **Services for children who are eligible for special education services:** Not all schools are able to provide the full range of special education services required. 59% of principals reported that the inability to provide the full range of services for these students significantly interferes with the ability to include them.
- **Needs for implementing effective inclusion:** The two most frequently mentioned needs were (a) training and practical tools, and (b) additional dedicated hours for inclusion and related educational, social, and emotional activities.
- **Professional support for the educational staff:** 42% of respondents participated in professional development programs on inclusion in the year preceding the survey. However, 9% of homeroom teachers and 7% of inclusion coordinators and special education teachers reported receiving **no guidance at all**.
- **Professional development needs of the educational staff in inclusion schools:** managing behavioral and disciplinary issues (78%); guidance and mentoring skills (66%); understanding types of disability and functional characteristics (62%).
- **Attitudes of the professional staff:** Respondents reported value-based attitudes supporting inclusion but also voiced concerns about the feasibility of implementing inclusion and cited challenges associated with its implementation. According to the respondents, intellectual disabilities and mental disorders were considered the most challenging for inclusion (only 26% and 29% respectively felt that it was feasible to include these pupils to a large extent). The types of disability that were perceived as feasible to include to a great extent were ADD (80%) and learning disabilities (75%).

■ **Key challenges regarding the relationship between school staff and parents:**

The intensity (frequency and level) of parental demands and the time required to respond to parents of students with disabilities compared to parents of students without disabilities (76%); supporting parents in coming to terms with their child's challenges (76%); and working with parents when there is disagreement regarding the type of educational framework (regular or special education) that is appropriate for their child (73%).

Recommended Actions

1. Ensure that primary schools are able to provide the full range of special education services.
2. Integrate teaching assistants into the school staff and allocate resources for their training and supervision.
3. Allocate dedicated hours for inclusion-related activity in schools – scheduled time for all staff members to perform the tasks required for implementing inclusive education, as well as time for professional development based on needs identified by the various staff roles.
4. Define and regulate the responsibilities of three central inclusion roles: special education teachers, inclusion coordinators, and school counselors.
5. Increase resources for professional development of the educational staff in the regular education facilities and for supporting the teachers in their work, to improve and adapt classroom management, teaching methods and curriculum.
6. Reduce class size in regular classes that include students with disabilities or, alternatively, consider adding staff in classes with several students who are eligible for special education.
7. Enhance communication with parents by: allocating designated hours for engagement with parents of students in the class in general, and with parents of students with disabilities in particular; providing specialized training for educational staff to equip them with tools for effective conduct and communication with parents of students with disabilities, including in challenging situations such as coming to terms with their child's diagnosis; and ensuring access to relevant information to support informed decision-making regarding the educational setting most appropriate for their child.