



MANDEL מנדל
בית ספר מנדל למנהיגות חינוכית
Mandel School for Educational Leadership

Implementing Inclusion

Schools as a Framework for Developing an Inclusive Culture

Executive Summary

Mandel School for Educational Leadership
Cohort 29

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In 2018, Amendment 11 to Israel's Special Education Law 1988-5748 came into effect. The Amendment was designed to ramp up the integration and inclusion in mainstream schools of children who previously would have been referred to special education frameworks. Three years on, it appears that the reform has strengthened the standing of parents as partners in the formal education of their children, and has significantly embedded the values and approach of inclusion and integration in educational language – a development that is evident throughout the hierarchy of the education system. At the same time, there is broad agreement that the continued implementation of the Amendment, across its varied aspects, requires re-examination. This consensus is reflected in statements by the senior staff of Israel's Ministry of Education, in the letter of appointment that the Mandel School for Educational Leadership received to conduct this research project, and in interviews we held with a diverse range of experts and stakeholders in this field.

As part of the program of study of Cohort 29 of the Mandel School for Educational Leadership, we conducted an in-depth study process of the implementation of the Amendment. This was done in full cooperation with the Division for Implementation of the Inclusion and Integration Reform of the Ministry of Education, as well as the Jerusalem Education Administration (to which an extended chapter in the full document is devoted). The process included tens of interviews with stakeholders in different roles related to inclusion and integration in the education system, including the chairs of special education eligibility and assessment committees, senior officials of the Education Ministry, parents, inclusion aides, school principals and teachers, and leaders of disabilities rights organizations. We also made field trips to educational institutions, and studied the relevant research literature, reports, and documents. All these resources contributed to the conclusions and recommendations we present here regarding the changes necessary in order to promote inclusion and integration of students with special needs in Israel's education system.

During this investigation, two central questions arose repeatedly, which reflect the difficulties and problems presented to us. These questions are the starting point for our recommendations:

- 1 What is the definition of a student with special needs, who is eligible to receive special education services?**
- 2 How can mainstream schools be made more inclusive, so that they can properly serve students with special needs?**

Difficulties Encountered in the Field

We identified four difficulties that, to the best of our understanding, prevent the optimal implementation of the inclusion and integration reform in its current format:

1. Structural difficulties relating to, among other things, the distribution of authority and responsibility within the Ministry of Education, and in particular the number of departments involved and the convoluted work processes, as well as the nature of the relationship between Ministry departments and the field.
2. Procedural difficulties relating to, among other things, the work of the special education eligibility and assessment committees, the role of Ministry supervisors in this process, the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork involved, and the fact that the timing of the assessment process does not match the timing of schools.
3. Resource difficulties relating to, among other things, the size and structure of resource allocations, the definition of eligibility for services, and the difficulty of actually providing the necessary services within the resource allocations.
4. Difficulties relating to the method of operation of special education institutions.

Notwithstanding the difficulties listed above, we assert that the main problem hampering the inclusion and integration of children with special needs is actually the lack of tools, experience, essential capabilities, and sense of self-efficacy in mainstream schools.



The findings of our research indicate that mainstream schools lack the necessary professional expertise, time, teaching hours, administrative flexibility, and motivation to optimally include and integrate children with special needs.



Our position, therefore, is that the key to the solution lies in strengthening mainstream schools as inclusive institutions.

Specification of the problems and difficulties

- **A gap between the values expressed in the inclusion and integration reform and the practical capabilities in the field**

Although Israel's Education Ministry has succeeded over the last three years in embedding language and values that present an ideational and ethical identification with the issue, the reform was launched without sufficient preparation. School principals feel that they do not have the necessary resources and infrastructure to implement the reform. Accessing and actualizing resources that have already been approved and allocated requires a convoluted process, and even then there is a lack of sufficient and trained staff to carry out the task.

- **Tension between competing approaches: Inclusion and integration versus evaluation and assessment**

The evaluation and assessment goals that are at the heart of the Israeli education system are not compatible with ways of teaching that facilitate the inclusion and integration of children with special needs.

- **Multiplicity of departments and programs in the Ministry of Education**

The Israeli Ministry of Education has three departments that deal directly with special education, and another three that do so indirectly. Each department has its own processes, professional identity, and field of expertise. There are extensive areas of overlap between the defined responsibilities and work processes of these departments, which creates confusion and difficulty in discourse and work processes with schools.

- **Tension between the "discourse of inclusion" and the need to distinguish between disabilities of varying degrees of prevalence**

The use of inclusion discourse and its application to all children experiencing learning difficulties creates a blurring of language. The language of inclusion was developed regarding children with commonly occurring special needs, but in practice, it is used to refer mainly to children with less common special needs.

- **The need for a broad, systemic, and holistic perspective of inclusion and integration in schools**

In the current model, schools are not given the authority to make decisions about students with special needs for whom they are responsible. This prevents schools from fulfilling their responsibility toward these students, and sometimes prevents them from fulfilling their responsibility toward their other students as well.

- **Complication and imbalance in the work of eligibility and assessment committees**

The convoluted nature of the eligibility and assessment process deters teachers from taking on tasks related to inclusion and integration, and damages the image of the process and the trust invested in it by both parents and educational staffs. This process is also accompanied by a “diagnosis industry” driven by payments to private individuals and organizations, which further exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities.

- **Lack of training in mainstream schools to promote inclusion and integration of students with special needs**

Educational staffs in mainstream institutions do not have the training necessary to enable the inclusion and integration of students with special needs. This lacuna can be traced first and foremost to the lack of relevant content in teacher education programs. There is also insufficient training in this realm throughout the professional development of teachers, unless occasionally initiated by school principals. Schools do not have professional and emotional support for teachers in this field. Inclusion aides also are not provided with relevant professional development either by schools or by the local authorities that employ them.

- **Difficulties in implementing the reform arising from class size**

Class sizes in Israel depend on the school's socioeconomic ranking, and vary from 32 to 35 children per class. In such circumstances, including and integrating children with special needs in mainstream classes is a real challenge. Providing appropriate attention and responses to all the children in the class, particularly children with special needs, demands considerable time and energy, and places a huge burden on educational staff.

- **Lack of therapeutic staff in the process of inclusion and integration of children with special needs**

There is a distinct lack of appropriate professionals, especially in the periphery. This prevents the provision of essential services, mainly paramedical services, to children who need them and are eligible for them.

In light of the difficulties and problems listed above, it is understandable that many parents choose to send their children with special needs to special education frameworks rather than to mainstream schools. We contend that in order to bring about real change in the education system in the spirit of the inclusion and integration reform, we must transform mainstream schools into inclusive institutions with a systemic approach, able to provide excellent education services to all students, including students with special needs.

Recommendations for Change

Underlying our recommendations is an approach that calls for shifting from “integration” to “inclusion.” We propose a paradigm shift from a situation in which there is an attempt to make tailor-made accommodations for each child with special needs to a situation in which every school is an inclusive home for all the students who attend it.

We believe that in order to realize this goal, it is necessary to strengthen the status of schools as institutions with an inclusive approach and the systemic capacity to ensure optimal inclusion.

This position is based on the following foundational premises:

1. The school is the most significant “end-user” unit in the education process.
2. A significant share of the challenges to implementing the reform stem not from students but from the lack of environmental and systemic conditions that allow students with special needs and all students in the education system to succeed.
3. Improving the capacity for inclusion requires dealing with pedagogy, in the deepest sense of the word.
4. Integration and inclusion should not be seen as specific fields of expertise (with the exception of expertise relating to medical disabilities). Such attitudes hamper, and even prevent, the realization of an inclusive approach.
5. Promoting an inclusive approach is a lever for change in the entire education system.

Based on the above premises and perceptions, we recommend three levers for change, and recommend the following:

1 Strengthening expertise and capacity building in all schools to enable inclusion

- a. Provide flexibility in the appointment, compensation, and redefinition of roles in the field of inclusion in schools.** Principals should be given an allocation of additional staff hours and position percentages, and should be allowed to decide how to use and distribute their allocation.
- b. Provide financial flexibility in managing and allocating resources for inclusion.** Principals should have flexibility regarding how to allocate hours and appoint staff. There should also be less regulation of the use of services and the means by which they are allocated to schools in areas related to inclusion.
- c. Establish in-school inclusion centers.** Professional knowledge, professional staff specializing in therapy, and pedagogical support for teaching staff regarding inclusion issues should be moved into schools themselves. We recommend establishing inclusion centers in schools, in part via cutting back on regionwide positions under the aegis of the Education Ministry's Municipal/Regional Support Centers (MATYAs), and by reducing the number of professional development hours provided at the Ministry's PISGAH centers for development of education faculty.
- d. Give schools responsibility and authority for providing services to children with special needs.** This is part of the transition from a discourse about functioning and assessment to a discourse about needs. The assessment process should be carried out by an internal school committee, with the participation of parents and in coordination with the Ministry, with approval from Ministry supervisors being required in certain cases. This step will increase confidence in schools, improve their sense of self-efficacy, and give them the responsibility of defining the needs of the students and the authority to provide the necessary responses. It will also make obsolete the eligibility and assessment committees – committees that eat up time and energy, on largely bureaucratic matters, and inadvertently create greater inequality.

- e. **Provide professional development and create experts in schools to improve inclusion processes.** We recommend creating professional development mechanisms that will equip teachers with the relevant expertise and appropriate training. Different areas of expertise should be defined, and teachers should be able to choose their desired area of specialization.
- f. **Include content related to the inclusive approach in principal training and in-service programs.** We recommend including theoretical and practical content related to different inclusive approaches in principal training programs (Avney Rosha) and in in-service training for early-career principals.
- g. **School inclusion and integration coordinator.** We consider this role to have great importance, and encourage including these types of coordinators in the development processes we propose in schools. Changing the compensation method for this role will affect the ability of coordinators to carry out the important tasks that fall under their responsibility.

2 The “Inclusion Index” – Creating a school budgeting model dependent on a new index, which will lead to change in schools’ attitudes toward the task of inclusion

- a. **Create an “Inclusion Index” for schools.** We recommend creating a new index, alongside the socio-economic “Nurturing Index,” that will be used in the allocation of resources and grants to schools. Schools’ scores on the Inclusion Index will be decided based on indicators such as the number of children benefiting from inclusion in the school, the provision of relevant professional development, having relevant positions and staff members, and more. The Inclusion Index will also be affected by the school’s Nurturing Index, in order to help address existing inequalities between Israel’s center and periphery.
- b. **Reduce the number of students in integrative classes that have students who are eligible for special education services.** Based on the assumption that lowering the number of students in classes is a significant lever for improving inclusion and integration processes and improving the quality of education for all students, we propose several alternatives for reducing the number of students, as part of the reform.
- c. **Increase budgeting to schools based on their Inclusion Index score.** The higher the school’s inclusion rating according to the various indicators, the larger the budgets that it should receive.
- d. **Allocate budgets for individual and group support for teachers based on schools’ Inclusion Index score.** We recommend that schools that have high Inclusion Index scores should receive special budgets for professional support for staff members.
- e. **Provide additional measurement and evaluation incentives related to the Inclusion Index.** We propose various ways to update existing measurement and evaluation tools so that they take into account integration and inclusion indicators, given the fact that these tools play a central role in work processes.
- f. **Create dynamic structures for special education classes in mainstream schools.** In the course of our research, we came across several models for class structures that were developed in schools as specific responses to needs. These included the “floating class” and the “hybrid class.” We propose making these models into generic alternatives from which schools can choose in order to meet their particular needs.

3 Changing the “conditions of the field” in schools, in order to improve their approach to inclusion and their inclusion capabilities

- a. Implement a structural change that supports inclusion.** This structural change is intended to ensure that every school principal has full access to all the resources offered by the Ministry of Education, in a process that is as simple and transparent as possible within legal and regulatory boundaries. The organizational structure of the Ministry should be modified to support this process and reduce (or eliminate) bureaucratic structures and procedures that stand in its way.
- b. Networking.** Networks of kindergartens and schools should be created at the local authority level, for purposes of resource sharing and collaboration in providing services to children with special needs. Networks can be based on different types of characteristics: specific communities, geographic proximity, elementary/secondary schools in the same school zone, and more.
- c. Improve the status of inclusion aides and transfer the responsibility for the recruitment and management of aides to schools.** We recommend that all aspects of the management of inclusion aides (except their formal status as local authority employees) should be made the responsibility of school management rather than the local authorities. This includes recruitment, organizing positions and schedules, professional support, and more. In addition, we recommend several ways to address the general lack of inclusion aides.
- d. Regulate the provision of special accommodations for matriculation exams for high-school students.** We propose processes that will support the provision of special conditions to students with commonly occurring special needs, should our recommendation be accepted that such students will not necessarily come before eligibility and assessment committees. These processes are designed to prevent a situation in which students and their families have to undergo independent and separate proceedings (which can include employing the services of private sector entities) in order to be eligible for the special conditions they need.

e. Create a multi-systemic mechanism for addressing social,

behavioral, and mental health problems. It emerged that sometimes there is a link between the assessment and recognition of commonly occurring disabilities, on the one hand, and broader social, emotional, and developmental phenomena found in youth in schools and general society, on the other. These phenomena, which manifest in behavioral problems and in rising levels of depression, anxiety, and violence in students, are sometimes translated into a diagnosis that meets the criteria of special education. Our recommendation is that such cases (the number of which we estimate to be fairly large) should be dealt with in cooperation with representatives of social services, health services, the local authority, and civil society organizations. We recommend creating a forum that will be led by the Education Ministry and will examine suitable ways for dealing with and preventing such cases, and for providing appropriate support to those who need it.