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THE KEY FOR PROMOTING THE SOCIAL CONDUCT OF
STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPERMENTS

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Abstract

The article presents a new Israeli training program for in-service support-teachers of students with visual impairments (VI). The program was developed by two experienced national mentors from the Israeli Ministry of Education. It focuses on support-teachers promoting students' social conduct and integration. The presented program is based on the literature of the uniqueness of social difficulties of students with VI and the great importance of their social integration in regular schools. On the other hand, it describes the lack of knowledge, competence and skills of teachers to promote students' social conduct. These findings are consistent with the situation in Israel, which led to the development of this program, as a foundation for a comprehensive in-service guidance model for support-teachers in the social field. The program is based on the conception that there is a close connection between a teacher's level of professional confidence and sense of self-efficacy to promote a student's social conduct and a student's willingness and motivation to be proactive in the social field. Consequently, the program combines a process of acquiring knowledge, teaching skills and professional tools with a process of empowering teachers in several aspects: role perception, self-efficacy and motivation. The support teachers' professional development after the program will be followed by a development of their students' social conduct from dependence to independence, self-management and even to leadership. The training program effectiveness will be evaluated as part of a PhD research.

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1. Introduction

In order to promote the integration of people with disabilities into the Israeli society, two laws (Special Education Law, 1988; Special Education Law, amendment 7- Integration Law, 2002) were passed by the Knesset (Israeli parliament). As a result, the Ministry of Education established a policy to integrate students with special needs including students with all kinds of vision impairments and blindness (Vision impairment and blindness, 2017), into regular schools.

Students with vision impairments (VI) in Israel are supported by dedicated support-teachers who are qualified in special education, specializing in the education of students with VI. They are employed by the Ministry of Education and attend regular schools a few times per week. They provide each student and the staff of his/her school with an entire support system in four main areas: visual functions, conduct as a student, social conduct and systematic support. This support is usually provided in private lessons and if required in the classroom (Vision and blindness - support, rights and entitlements, n.d.).

The literature about the inclusion of students with special needs including students with VI, emphasizes that the need not only to promote their educational integration, but their social integration as well (Celeste & Kobal, 2010; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2010, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Whitburn, 2014). This concept is reflected in the integration policy in Israel as in other countries worldwide (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018).

However, the situation is more complicated. Students with special needs, including students with VI, have supplementary social difficulties (Reiter & Schalock, 2008; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013). The social difficulties of students with VI are particularly in their social interactions with fully sighted peers (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2015; Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012). Furthermore, literature shows that special education teachers are considered to be critical agents in promoting the social development of students with special needs (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013; Vlachou, Stavroussi, & Didaskalou, 2016). Thus, there is greater importance to teachers having the knowledge and skills to promote these students' social conduct at school (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2015; Khadka et al., 2012; Reiter & Schalock, 2008; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Sacks & Gaylord-Ross, 1989; Vlachou et al., 2016). On the other hand, the literature describes a lack of teachers' knowledge, competence and skills required to advance the social conduct of students in general and particularly students with special needs in regular schools (Dobbins, 2007; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), including students with VI (Hess, 2007, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). As such, there is a great need to prepare teachers to promote students' social conduct using various methods such as training programs for pre-service and in-service teachers, mentoring and continuous professional development in the field (Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Worrell et al., 2014).

This article presents a unique, new Israeli training program for support-teachers to promote the social conduct of students with VI. The article's uniqueness is in providing both a presentation of a development model for a preparation, support and guidance process for support-teachers in the social field, and a detailed presentation of a holistic and systematic training program, which is the starting point of the whole model.

1.1. Uniqueness of the training program as a foundation for a comprehensive development model

This model and program have been developed and conducted by national mentors in the Israeli Ministry of Education. These mentors have many years of pedagogical experience in the social-emotional field with this particular population: Dr. Allan Shavlev, Developmental Psychologist, and Orit Shapira, educational counsellor and art therapist.

The model and program are based on theoretical literature, as well as on insights from working with students with VI and with educational support teams. The model and the training program for support-teachers focus on advancing students' social conduct including social knowledge, social skills, self-awareness, social awareness, normative social life skills and self-advocacy skills in socio-cultural contexts (Vision and blindness - support, rights and entitlements, n.d.).

The model starts with the training program followed by both a continuous mentoring process, personal and within a team of support teachers, and a continuous professional development process in various relevant social topics (Vision and blindness - support, rights and entitlements, n.d.).

The program's uniqueness is its concept that there is a close connection between a support teacher's level of professional confidence and sense of self-efficacy to promote a student's social conduct, and a student's willingness and motivation to be proactive in the social field. This notion is based on both a literary review of the required preparation of special education teachers in the social field (Dobbins, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Vlachou et al., 2016) and feedback from the support-teachers in Israel. According to this idea, the program places teachers at the center and addresses their needs, doubts, emotions etc. In this sense, the program is dynamic and adapted to the unique needs of teachers.

Accordingly, the program combines a process of acquiring knowledge and teaching skills with a process of empowering teachers in several aspects: role perception, self-efficacy and motivation to promote students' social conduct. Additionally, the program is operational and applicable, providing built-in tools for evaluating students' social conduct and developing an annual work plan based on that assessment.

The program also invites teachers to apply the contents, skills and tools taught in the training program to their students and then share the results and their insights as part of a peer-learning process. The teachers' development process after the program will be followed by a development process of students' social conduct from dependence to independence, self-management and even leadership guided by their support teachers.

2. Literature Review

This review provides a detailed description of the support teachers' training program towards promoting the social conduct of students with VI developed by Dr. [Alen Shavlev & Orit Shapira in 2010](#). The review includes theoretical rationale, program aims, target population, a description of the internal tools used in the program and of the program stages.

2.1. Theoretical rationale

Children learn acceptable and adapted social behaviour through observation, modelling and feedback (Bandura, 1977). Their social development and their socialization are based on their parent-child relationship and in later childhood, when they gain greater autonomy, are acquired through interaction with others (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1924). Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1969) also emphasized the importance of the interactions with others, especially with peers, as a necessary condition for social and cognitive development. Hence, early social development is incidentally acquired through imitation and modelling. Children learn through observation of visual cues from others (Kekelis, Sacks, & Gylord-Ross, 1997; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). Despite that incidental learning process, the literature shows the importance of promoting the children's social conduct through social skills instruction in schools (DiPerna, 2006). Especially because, mastering social skills during school time correlates with the student's academic and social achievements and later on with life adjustment (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008) and career success (Cook et al., 2008; Hess, 2015). Due to these benefits of social skills instruction, it should be an integrative part of the school curriculum for all students (DiPerna, 2006; Vlachou et al., 2016). Pavri and Hegwer-DiVita (2006) also emphasize that teachers play a critical role in providing social skills instruction and emotional support for all students. Schonert-Reichl (2017) reinforces this statement by claiming that in order to achieve full potential as productive adult citizens in a pluralistic society, educators must focus on promoting the students' social competence.

Students with special needs in inclusive schools may experience more social difficulties such as building relationships and friendships with peers and acceptance by peers (Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006). Due to that social skills instruction for these students is even more crucial for both their social integration and their later adult life adjustment (Gresham, 1983; Hartmann, 2012; Hess, 2007; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013).

Students with VI cannot acquire social skills through incidental learning mainly because many social gestures essential for social functioning develop on the basis of visual hints and cues, rather than on speech. Therefore, students with VI have often difficulties to establish and consolidate inter-personal relations with others, especially with peers (Hess, 2015; Sacks & Gaylord-Ross, 1989). These students also have difficulties in acquiring a range of social skills that allow the development of autonomy and independence (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2010, 2015; Kekelis, Sacks, & Gylord-Ross, 1992; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). Thus, it is more important for teachers to promote these students' social skills and foster their autonomy at school (Davis, 2003; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Whitburn, 2014). However, while there is a great need to promote the social conduct of all students, the literature describes how teachers lack the knowledge, competence and skills required to advance the social skills and conduct of students in general and in particular those with special needs (Dobbins, 2007; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), including students with VI (Davis, 2003; Hess, 2007, 2010, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Whitburn, 2014).

The literature also shows teachers' doubts about promoting students' social conduct, questioning: Is it a part of their role as educators? Do they feel a sense of self-efficacy to conduct interventions in that field? etc. (Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Concern has been raised about the suitability of teachers' preparation to promote the social conduct of students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017) and especially of students with special needs in regular schools

(Dobbins, 2007; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013), including students with VI (Hess, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Sacks & Gaylord-Ross, 1989). Therefore, there is great need to prepare the support-teachers to promote the social conduct of students with VI using training programs together with mentoring and continuous professional development.

2.2. Program aims

The main aim of the training program is to provide a holistic and detailed preparation enabling teachers to promote the social conduct of students with VI, while addressing the differential needs and difficulties of each teacher.

In order to achieve this, the program targets two main domains: The first, is providing knowledge, skills and teaching capabilities in the social field with regard to students with VI. The second is encouraging a significant internal process of developing teachers' self-awareness of their beliefs, difficulties, needs and doubts regarding the promotion of students' social conduct. In other words, the program aims address not only the pedagogical axis, but also to the axis that places teachers at the center of an internal learning process referring to their feelings, awareness and perceptions regarding their ability to promote students' social conduct. The purpose of this significant reflection process is to enhance and empower teachers' perceptions in three aspects: role perception, sense of self efficacy and motivation to advance the social conduct of students with VI.

2.3. Program target population

In-service support teachers, which support students with VI, at the beginning of their career in the Ministry of Education.

2.4. The internal tools used in the training program

- **Professional Standard Book for the Support-teachers (second edition, 2011)** - The book includes professional standards for teachers who support students with VI in fields such as: support of visual functions, support of learning conduct including Braille learning etc.

The program uses the chapter of the book, dealing with supporting the social conduct of students with VI. It includes description of the educational processes that support-teachers must carry out for promote goals in the three main support axes of the social conduct of students with VI: knowledge and social skills, normative social life skills and self-advocacy skills in social contexts.

- **Questionnaire for Evaluation of Students' Social Conduct (fourth edition, 2019)** - The questionnaire is a tool that assists support-teachers to evaluate the social functions of students with VI in a professional and accurate way. The questionnaire is used for two main purposes: structuring a personal support program to improve a student's social conduct and monitoring student progress, respectively.

The questionnaire has been shortened, improved and validated. Its fourth edition consists of twenty-six statements, each examining a certain social functioning within the three main axes mentioned above. The questionnaire includes closed questions with a response scale, representing social functioning from dependence to self-management. A statement in which a student's performance is low, could be chosen as a social goal to promote.

- **Guidelines for the Evaluation of student Social Conduct (third edition, 2019)** - The guide assists support-teachers at all stages of social evaluation of students with VI and enables them to use the

evaluation questionnaire wisely. The guide includes explanations such as: how to complete the evaluation questionnaire, quantitative calculation of results, analysing results etc. The guide also explains how to choose one of the 26 functions as the most appropriate goal for student advancement.

• **Guidelines for the Elaboration of a Work Program in the field of Social conduct (second edition, 2019)** - This guide is a continuation of the previous guide and helps support-teachers to construct tailored individual programs to promote students' social conduct based on a chosen goal. The guide includes explanations such as: break the chosen goal into sub-goals, define the scope of the program to achieve the chosen goal, design lesson plans, etc.

2.5. The program stages

Stage one – Program introduction - This stage includes explanations on how the program is conducted and expectations of teachers. In addition, teachers are invited to raise questions, share difficulties, dilemmas and doubts regarding the promotion of the social conduct of students with VI throughout the program. At this stage, teachers are asked to select one of their students who is studying in a regular school and to apply the aforementioned tools and the contents taught during the program to this student and to share their results and insights at the relevant stages.

Stage two - A workshop to promote teachers' self-awareness of both the importance of the social aspect in their lives and characteristics of their social conduct - This stage includes the following topics: significance of social aspects for them, the extent to which social aspects affect the quality of their lives, level of satisfaction with their social conduct, identification of social coping habits that characterize them and social characteristics they would like to improve and why.

Stage three - A workshop to examine the teachers' attitudes towards promoting their students' social conduct - The workshop aim is to focus teachers' attention on the following points: Do they view promoting their students' social conduct as part of their role as support teachers? Do they feel they have the capabilities to do so? Do they have motivation to do it? What difficulties arise? What would they like get out of the program? The purpose of this workshop is to legitimize diverse voices of teachers and the expression of their difficulties throughout the program in order to enable professional responses for them.

Stage Four - Introduction to social conduct of students with VI - This subject is presented using both literature (Celeste & Kobal Grum, 2010; Davis, 2003; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2007, 2015; Humphrey, 2013; Kekelis et al., 1997; Quality of life - preparation for life, n.d.; Riggio, 2006; Roe, 2008; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015; Whitburn, 2014) and the Professional Standard Book. The introduction includes the following topics: the importance of social conduct and its implications on the quality of a student's life currently and in the future, social development of children with VI and its characteristics, the need for students to acquire social skills at school, clarifying the role of support-teachers in that respect.

Stage five – Main models and support principles for the advancement of students' social conduct - This stage is taught using the Professional Standard Book and literary sources. The main models and principles taught are:

- A gradual support process to promote development of social conduct from dependence to independence, self-management, and even to leadership (Hess, 2015; Kekelis et al., 1997; Riggio, 2006; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006).

- Promoting the learning process from simple to more complex skills through experiences of success (Lavoie, 2007).
- Identifying and developing a student's growth potential according to the humanistic educational approach (Hess, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015; Reiter, 2008; Reiter & Schalock, 2008). According to this approach, attitudes toward students must be as whole entities, where disability is just another one of their characteristics, but not their main characteristic.
- Identifying tendencies, desires, preferences, skills, strengths and qualities of students and empowering them. In other words, it is crucial that the support process focuses on student qualities and not only on coping with disability (Hess, 2014, 2015; Reiter, 2008; Reiter & Schalock, 2008).
- An additional principle is to promote students' quality of life in various areas to foster their abilities to integrate meaningfully into their community. This goal will be achieved by teachers promoting students' experiences of success in different social frameworks: regular school, peer group of students with VI, leisure activities in the community, youth movements and more (Hess, 2010, 2011, 2015; Reiter, 2008; Reiter & Schalock, 2008).

Stage six – Assessment of students' social conduct and writing a social profile - At this stage, how to apply the following tools will be taught:

- Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Social Conduct
- Guidelines for the Evaluation of Social Conduct

The questionnaire is completed by support teachers, based on information collected from other relevant staff members.

At this stage teachers learn how to calculate questionnaire results and translate them into a student social profile, which describes a student's situation on each axis and in general, indicating strengths and points for reinforcement.

Stage seven – Social goal selection based on the results of the questionnaire - The selection is done according to the criteria defined in the Guidelines for the Elaboration of a Work Program such as: student desire, urgency, chances of success, and more. The selected goal will be examined by a support teacher on two levels:

First, a question is asked about the source of a student's difficulty achieving the goal. If the source is not related to vision impairment, then the goal is not suitable for a work program. When the source is related to vision impairment, it is suitable and will be examined at the second level. Then a second question should be asked about what a student needs in order to achieve this goal, that is to say, whether he/she is lacking social knowledge and skills or motivation. If it is only a matter of motivation, there is no point focusing on this goal in structuring a work program, and a different goal must be chosen since support-teachers must encourage the entire educational staff to promote a student's motivation for social actions on a regular basis. If it is a matter of missing social knowledge and skills, then it can be used for structuring a work program.

Stage eight - Elaboration of a support program adjusted to attain a social goal - At this stage teachers learn how to design a support program to attain a selected goal, according to program guidelines. Teachers learn how to break down any chosen student social conduct goal into several sub-goals that

include three aspects: social knowledge, social skills and self-awareness, which are required to achieve the sub-goals. For each sub-goal, teachers learn to plan a lesson.

Stage nine - Selection of appropriate means of learning - At this stage, a range of work opportunities from the Standards Book and Program Guidelines are presented and demonstrated, such as: using box games, pictures, texts, dramatic games, movies, audio recordings and more. Teachers are also invited to use their creativity and create new work opportunities adapted to specific needs, age, ability and interests of their student and incorporate them into their lessons.

Stage ten - Criteria for assessing the success of a work program - There is a tendency among support-teachers to decide whether a program is successful, based on subjective feelings. At this stage, more accurate and professional criteria for measuring the success of a program are presented, such as: degree of goal suitability to student need, a student's progress toward self-management in achieving the selected goal, participation of educational staff and its recruitment to advance the goal and more.

Stage eleven - Exposing teachers to graduate students' success stories - Graduate students share with the support-teachers their stories about how they coped successfully with their vision impairment and its accompanying difficulties. Teachers are invited to ask these students questions about how their support-teachers contributed to their social development, etc.

Stage twelve – Summary and personal reflection in peer learning process - At this stage, teachers present the programs they designed based on the tools and contents learned, to all participants for feedback, peer learning and empowerment. Presentations also include results of their implementation of the program, difficulties, dilemmas, successes and insights.

3. Research Method

This article is a Literature review article that describes a new training program which will be examined as a part of a future research and as such does not include a research method description.

4. Analyses and Findings

This article is a Literature review article that describes a new training program which will be examined as a part of a future research and as such does not include analyses.

5. Conclusion

The literature review presented in this paper demonstrates the huge importance for teachers to promote the social conduct of students with VI in regular schools. On the other hand, the literature presents teachers' lack of knowledge, competence and skills to execute this. Moreover, it indicates that there are insufficient training programs in the social field adapted to teachers of students with VI. Therefore, there was a need to develop a unique training program for support-teachers to enhance the social conduct of students with VI. This paper aims to fill this gap in knowledge by presenting a detailed description of a training program for support-teachers in the social field.

Evaluation research will be carried out as part of a PhD thesis to explore the program effectiveness. The research will assess the training program's contribution to support teachers' perceptions - role perception, self-efficacy and motivation - of promoting the social conduct of students with VI. The research will employ mixed methods in a multiphase design that will include three sequential studies:

- **Study 1: A qualitative study - focus group.** The aims of this study are to acquire views and perceptions of support-teachers who have completed the training program about its effectiveness and about their difficulties, doubts, feelings and dilemmas in promoting their students' social conduct.
- **Study 2: A quantitative study – questionnaires.** The main aim of this study is to explore the changes in the support teachers' perceptions (role perception, self-efficacy and motivation) of promoting the social conduct of students with VI following the training program employing questionnaires at several points in time, before, during and after the program and six months later. Another aim is to examine the impact of support teachers' participation in the training program on the social conduct of their students.
- **Study 3: A qualitative study - in-depth interviews.** The aim of this study is to gain a profound understanding of the perceptions, views, feelings, dilemmas and doubts of teachers participating in the training program so as to obtain complementary information to the questionnaires' findings.

We estimate that the PhD research will show that this training program achieves its goals and contributes the personal and professional improvement of the to support teachers' perceptions (role perception, self-efficacy and motivation) of promoting the social conduct of students with VI. We expect that the program will contribute to the support teachers' performance towards promoting the social conduct of students with VI, and we think that it will be possible to adapt this program to other countries and cultures as well as to other student disabilities

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