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**TRAINING PARA-EDUCATORS WORKING WITH CHILDREN
WITH ASD – A NEW GAME PLAN**

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of a training program for para-educators working with children with ASD in elementary school settings. Para-educators are school staff members who are responsible for implementing student programs in inclusion settings. Often, para-educators are referred to as paraprofessionals, teacher aides, teacher assistants or instructional assistants. This training program is based on the philosophy of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) that uses evidence-based tools to teach significant social skills. The training program was developed by the researcher and Dr. Michal Hirschmann and is expected to be implemented in a large city in Israel during the 2018-2019 school year. The program focuses on teaching para-educators key tools in ABA and provides practical tools to detect missing social skills. For the first time, this program trains para-educators to take an active role in initiating and leading behavioral support rather than passively implementing other plans. Para-educators will learn to collect data to build suitable behavioral support using ordinary games. The games are adapted to teach and train social skills. The program expands on teaching socially significant values such as cooperation, adhering to rules, perseverance, waiting and self-control. This training program may also be offered to para-educators working with other populations in inclusion settings in elementary schools.

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1. Introduction

The research addresses a training program intended for para-educators who work with children diagnosed with autism in inclusion settings and examines the contribution of a training program titled Social Skills Training of Inclusion Paraeducators (Sol's Tip) to para-educators' self-efficacy and functioning in elementary schools. Para-educators accompany children in inclusion settings in the lessons and breaks between lessons at elementary schools in Israel. This program was developed by the researcher and Dr. Michal Hirschmann and focuses on providing para-educators with tools to teach social skills through games that exist in the natural routine of elementary school children. The program is based on the principles and tools of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) to acquire social skills, which promote full or partial inclusion of ASD children in general education classrooms. In addition, para-educators will acquire tools to detect challenging social situations at school, collect relevant data and construct behavioral support.

1.1. Definitions of Autism and Social Skills

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by deficits in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, in conjunction with restrictive and repetitive behavior, interests or activities that can be identified during early development years (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to Hassan et al. (2018) deficits in social interaction and communication can include non-verbal communication such as eye contact and body language, difficulty in developing and maintaining social contacts or challenges with social-emotional reciprocity (including holding a conversation) and expressing or understanding emotions.

In the literature, there are numerous definitions of social skills adapted to different populations and within those definitions different researchers investigate various clusters of social abilities. Elliott & Gresham (1993) address social abilities such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control, while Eldar (2007) and Avyzo, & Eldar (2009) targeted 12 behavioral goals in the Educating through the Physical model (ETP model) that include cooperation with the teacher, attention and concentration, following rules and routines, waiting, independent performance, dealing with demands, perseverance, termination of favored activity, cooperation with others, self-control, self-management, and peer teaching.

According to Aljadef-Abergel, Ayvazo, and Eldar, (2012) social skills defined as prerequisites to academic performance and success in schools. They claim that social skills are competencies that enable an individual to interact positively with environmental factors. This allows an individual access to positive responses and avoiding negative ones. In addition, these competencies allow individuals to easily adapt to changing social demands. In school settings, the social skills required manifest in different situations throughout schooldays and include the interaction with peers, independent work or play, appropriate interaction with teacher and reception of feedback (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001 cited in Aljadef-Abergel et. al. 2012).

1.2. What is Behavior Analysis? - A Discipline Overview

Applied Behavior Analysis is a scientific approach concentrating on understanding and improving human behavior. This approach focuses on behaviors that can be objectively defined and have social

importance. In the behavioral approach, environmental factors influencing behavior are identified and intervention programs are built to modify these factors. According to this approach, there is a proven correlation between interventions and behavioral improvement (Cooper, Heron & Heward, 2007).

Eldar (2017) found that the roots of Applied Behavioral Analysis lie at the beginning of the 20th century, in the behavioral views of the researchers Thorndike, Watson and Pavlov, who found correlations between organisms and their environment. Thorndike discovered theories and principals of learning processes, the most famous of which is the law of effect, presented in 1898. According to this law, if behavior has any sort of outcome, the outcome will affect occurrences of this behavior in the future, and its assimilation as a pattern of behavior in an animal or person. In his work, Thorndike presented the concept of reinforcement, which is one of the fundamental principles of modern behaviorism. Another concept Thorndike stamped on behavior analysis was learning curve, which showed the correlation between the frequency of a behavior and quality of learning over time (Eldar, 2017).

Today, the field of behavior analysis is made up of three sub-areas including – conceptual behavior analysis (behaviorism – philosophy and theory of behavior research), experimental behavior analysis (illustrates behavioral principals under laboratory conditions), and applied behavior analysis focusing on the application of scientifically proven interventions to modify socially important behaviors whilst maintaining strict ethical rules (Eldar, 2017).

Over the last decade, the field has developed greatly in Israel. Today there are eight study programs to gain certificates in applied behavior analysis. Many cities employ behavior analysts through the ministry of education to work in the regular and special education systems with various populations. In addition, there are many behavior analysts working in the private sector particularly with children diagnosed with autism. In March 2018, the Israeli Council for Behavior Analysis was established with the purpose of organizing the behavior analysis profession in Israel and establish standards and appropriate legislation for behavior analysts working in Israel.

1.3. Previous Research of ABA based Training Programs for Para-educators

There is evidence-based research indicating that ABA allows children diagnosed with autism to improve their functioning at home and at school (Rosenwasser & Axelrod, 2001; Lindgren & Doobay, 2011; Kornacki, Ringdahl, Gianoumis, Sjostro, & Nuernberger, 2013). Inclusive elementary schools emphasize promoting children in inclusion in both academic and social areas. The academic aspect has been researched for many years. According to Hassan et al. (2018) the social aspect has been studied through evaluations of group-based social skills training. Some of these studies yield strong results while others produced only moderate effect sizes.

In many studies of social skills training for children with ASD the intervention takes place in a contrived setting. This leads to difficulties in generalization and maintenance of learned skills to natural environments. Other intervention programs, such as The FRIEND Playground Program (Vincent, Openden, Gentry, Long, & Matthews, 2017), aim to improve social skills during breaks using highly skilled trained playground facilitators. These facilitators are trained in ABA based interventions such as

discrete trial teaching, pivotal response treatments (PRT) and positive behavior supports. The FRIEND program provides ongoing guidance by a behavior analyst to implement structured recess activities.

While there is a recent study of training caregivers to support social skills development for their child with autism (Hassan et al., 2018), there is no para-educators training program based on behavioral tools to detect and implement behavior support to promote the social skills of children with ASD in inclusion settings. In Israel, there is no program in which para-educators assume an active role to teach social skills to children with ASD in inclusion settings.

2. Main Body

2.1. The Training Program for Para-educators – A New Game Plan

The training program for para-educators to work on the social skills of children diagnosed with ASD included in the educational system in Israel, is based on principles of Applied Behavior Analysis used by behavioral analysts in their work in the Israeli education system. In addition to creating a supportive learning environment prior to applying an intervention, Eldar (2017) found nine stages for building a client-appropriate intervention program. Figure 1 presents the stages Eldar (2017) found as a process to build as a behavioral intervention:

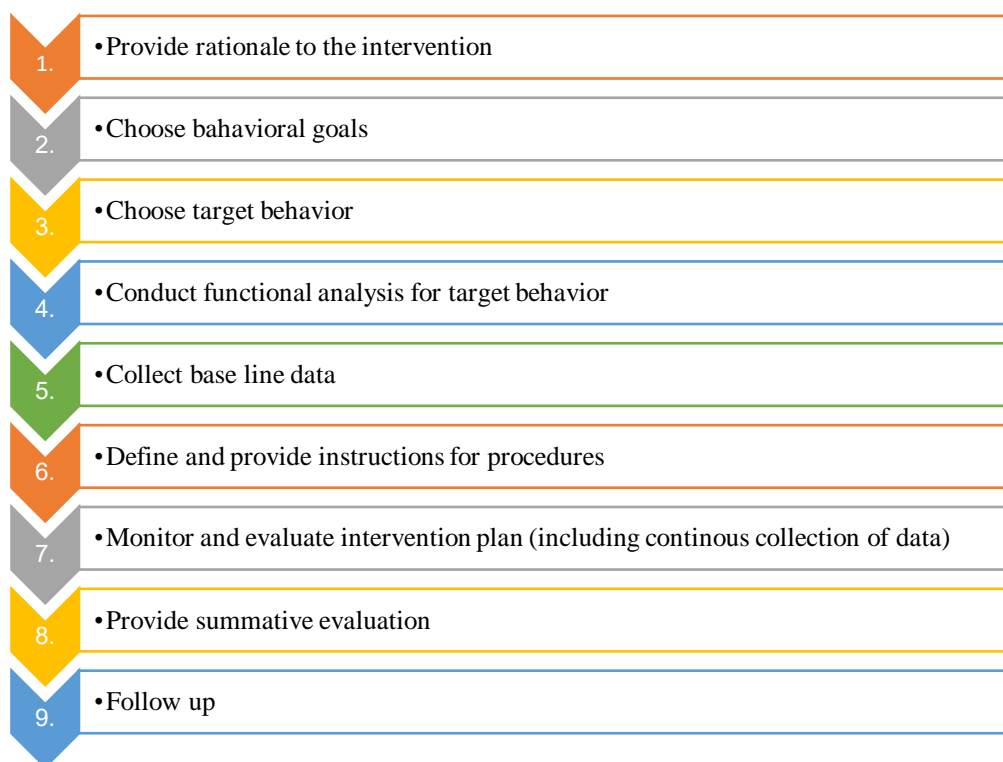


Figure 01. Stages to build a behavioral intervention

The para-educators' training program uses a structured process to teach para-educators to identify the social skills they need to work on and build proper behavior support. The process includes the stages of choosing a target behavior, collecting data on social situations, and deciding what games provide the behavioral support for the child to improve social skills. An emphasis is placed on teaching important

social skills through games that are naturally embedded in the children routines at school. In addition, the training program focuses on the roles of para-educators and their areas of responsibility according to the Ministry of Education's Director-General's circular (2011).

The training course is spread over an academic year and includes 20 meetings lasting two academic hours each. They include theory and practical workshops. The training program includes a monitored internet forum for questions and answers.

2.1.1. Program goals

The para-educators training program has three goals that include increasing para-educators self-efficacy in working with children with ASD in inclusion settings, providing practical tools to increase level of knowledge and enhancing their ability to implement instructions.

2.1.2. Target population

According to the legal advisor to the Ministry of Education, Morag (Protocol 470, Meeting of the Education and Sports Committee, 2011), Ministry of Education Director-General's Circulars are "by law, pedagogic guidelines given to the education system" (translated from Hebrew). The circular of 1 July 2011 provides the following distinction between three types of assistance for children with special needs: (Figure 02)

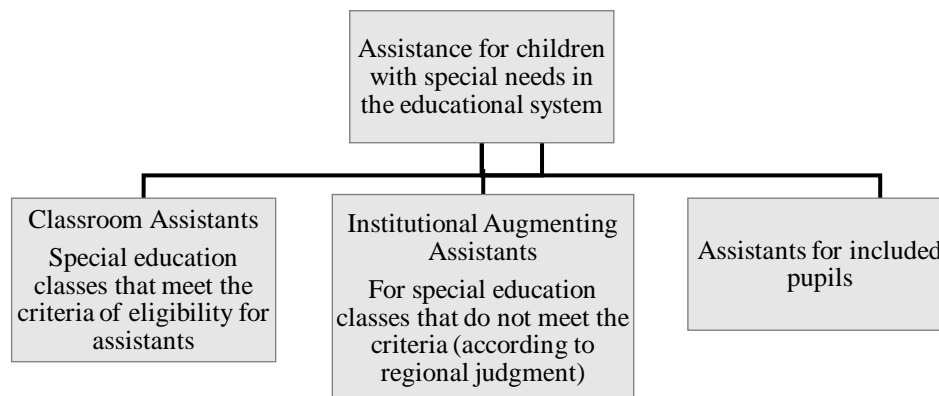


Figure 02. Types of assistance for children with special needs

The para-educators' training program is intended for those assisting children diagnosed on the autism spectrum who are fully or partially included in elementary schools. In the Israeli education system these para-educators are called assistants. In the literature the definition of para-educators and their roles differ from country to country. Fisher and Pleasants (2012) argued that in the U.S.A. every district employs different names for para-educators. The most common names for the role include:

paraprofessionals, teacher aides, teacher assistants, instructional assistants or para-educators. Irrespective of the title, para-educators are perceived as educational figures responsible for applying programs for pupils with special needs. It is an extremely important role because pupils' success depends on the support they receive from para-educators and the ability of para-educators to implement changes according to the children needs. The para-educator role is to support the special need student on all levels as needed including academic, social and physical. According to the 2011 Director General's Circular no. 1.2-39 in Israel, home room teachers are required to lead the planning, implementation, guidance and monitoring progress of the child with special needs together with relevant professional help available at school or in the district. In practice, often, lack of homeroom teacher training and expertise in special education leads to para-educator greater responsibility to the child progress and success in school.

In Israel, the Ministry of Education does not supervise, guide or check what para-educators do in the field. According to the 2011 Director General's Circular no. 1.2-39 in Israel the only requirement of para-educators is to hold a high school diploma. The salary of para-educator escorting a child with special needs throughout the day is 70% funded by the Ministry of Education and 30% funded by the local municipality of the area where the child resides.

Fisher and Pleasants (2012) argued that in an amendment to the IDEA Law in 2008, the American Congress determined a standard for the employment of para-educators working with the inclusion of children with special needs in the American education system by which only those with training are employed. Moreover, the need for supervision was determined. Similar to the U.S.A., in 2011, the Director General's Circular no. 1.2-39 in Israel instructed the Ministry of Education and local authorities to cooperate in preparing a training program for para-educators in fields relevant to their work.

In practice, despite these guidelines, few authorities provide training for para-educators. In addition, in the Israeli education system, there is no specific para-educator training program to promote the social skills of children with autism based on behavioral principles. The new amendment to the special education law passed in Israel in July, 2018 (Special Education Law Amendment, 2018), allows parents of children with special needs to choose the type of educational placement -- between special education schools, special education classes within regular school setting or inclusion in general education classroom with the support of a para-educator -- for their children. This choice will increase the number of children with special needs in inclusion settings, and in turn, the need for para-educators training and the training of the educational staff at general education schools.

50 para-educators working in elementary schools with children with autism in a large Israeli city will participate in this research to examine the contribution of this training program to para-educator self efficacy, and functioning with children with ASD in inclusion settings.

3. Methodology

A literature review was conducted to address different definitions of para-educators' roles and different names used in the scientific literature. The search was limited to official government documents and peer reviewed articles published in the English and Hebrew. As the approach to including children with special needs changed with time in many Western countries, the approach to para-educators' roles

also changed. In order to reflect the most current definition and roles of para-educators, the search was limited to publications within the past 10 years.

In addition, studies detailing the implementation of similar programs using ABA principles were reviewed. This review allowed initial conclusions leading to the training program presented in this research.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Training program's uniqueness

Sol's Tip is an intervention program designed to fill a gap in knowledge and provide para-educators with practical tools to enhance their ability to promote children with ASD in inclusion settings. This intervention program is accompanied by research whose goal is to examine the contribution of the intervention program to para-educators' self-efficacy and functioning when working with children with ASD in inclusion settings. The research focuses on two questions. The first question examines the contribution of the behavior-based training program to the self-efficacy and functioning of para-educators working with children with ASD in inclusion. The second research question evaluates the contribution of this program to para-educators' knowledge relating to their work with children with ASD in inclusion settings. Future research can apply the suggested intervention program to other populations with para-educators in inclusion settings in elementary schools.

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