



THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL COUNSELOR IN THE INCLUSION AND INTEGRATION PROCESSES

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Abstract:

The current study examined the attitudes and perceptions of educational counselors with respect to the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms (mandated by the Israeli Special Education law), along with assessing their sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction and stress. 101 elementary and middle school educational counselors filled out questionnaires on self-efficacy, job satisfaction, stress and mainstreaming perceptions. In addition, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways they cope with inclusion. Significant differences were found between elementary school and middle school educational counselors in their attitudes toward inclusion, where elementary school counselors were more favorable, had a higher sense of self-efficacy and expressed more positive attitudes towards inclusion. Self-efficacy and job satisfaction were correlated. In general, educational counselors deal with a wide variety of stress factors and are aware of the difficulties inherent to social inclusion as compared to academic inclusion.

Keywords: educational counselor, special education, inclusion, self-efficacy, job satisfaction

1. Theoretical Background

Growing numbers of students with special education needs are enrolled in regular classes in mainstream schools. Educational counselors in these schools play an important role in the inclusion of students with special needs since they often provide much required and crucial support to many of the actors involved in the process.

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1.1 Educational Counselors and their Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Mainstream Schools

There is considerable literature on the attitudes of school staff towards inclusion (Korkos & Korkos, 2016; Erhard & Umanksy, 2005) and until recently most studies on inclusion have examined the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion (Armstrong, 2018; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; First Inbar & Galili, 2011; Heyder et al., 2020; Zinn-Dror, 2016). This may be due to the fact that in the past, the educational counselor's role was mainly focused on individuals (Cohen, 2014), whereas today the educational counselor is perceived as an "*aiding professional*", who provides ideological and social empowerment (Erhard, 2014). According to Cohen (2014), educational counselors are in charge of numerous therapeutic and organizational issues in schools. They are involved in the decision-making process along with the school staff and are at the forefront in times of distress. Part of the role of educational counselors is to direct students and assist them whether in person or in a group, while acting as a liaison between the student and other actors in the system (Pinyan-Weiss, 2010). Educational counselors play a vital role in the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classes and bear the responsibility for their successful integration (Zinn-Dror, 2016). They face significant burnout, workloads, stress, and lack of clarity in their role (Moyer, 2011; Roznho & Gilat, 2017). Despite their desire to teach integrated classrooms with students with special needs, schools face numerous difficulties imposed by the de-facto implementation of the inclusion process (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Heiman & Avissar, 2020). One of the key difficulties is the lack of research on special education and inclusion (Brophy & Whittingham, 2013; Razali et al., 2013; Shadreck, 2012).

1.2 Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

Today, because of the inclusion of more special education students, it is the teacher's role to find a way to reach out to each student. In differential teaching, the teacher identifies the needs of the students and allows them to learn according to their level, cognitive or cultural ability, or according to strengths and learning preferences (Keshet-Mor, 2017). Currently, parents of students with special needs have multiple options available to them when choosing an educational framework. These include special education schools, integrative inclusion, i.e., a special classroom in the mainstream education system, and inclusive integration, i.e., individual integration of students in a mainstream class in the mainstream education system.

In 1975, the US Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) to support the placement of students with special needs in an environment where they could develop without limitations. Sandoval-Gomez, Cosier, and Cardina (2020) examined the inclusion of students with special needs in different countries and found that most preferred a type of integration that best benefits the needs of these students. However, not all researchers are of the same opinion as to the attitudes of educational counselors towards inclusion. For example, Bowen and Glenn (1998) found that educational counselors sometimes have lower expectations for students with special needs. Similarly, Castillo (2016) found that at times, educational counselors are

prejudicial toward students with disabilities in a manner that impacts their work with these students. However, in general Erhard and Umanksy (2005) and Zinn-Dror (2016) found that educational counselors tend to show a positive attitude towards inclusion and support their school's inclusion policy.

1.3 Self-Efficacy and Stress among the School Staff

Hen (2010) argued that students' sense of self-efficacy is directly influenced by their interaction between the important figures in their lives and these individuals' attitude towards them. Teachers' sense of self-efficacy is defined as their perception of their ability to fulfill professional tasks related to different educational demands (Hen, 2010). Teachers whose sense of self-efficacy is high have more faith in their students than teachers with a lower sense of self-efficacy (Kass, 2012). Bandura (1977, 1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's perception of competence with respect to a specific task or behavior. Bandura (1982) argued that self-efficacy affects emotional responses and behavior, especially when reacting to stress and an unfamiliar situation. Self-efficacy is considered to be the process of connecting knowledge and action. Hence, people who doubt their ability will invest less effort and easily give up when facing difficulties. They may also feel anxious in situations they fear they cannot handle (Bandura, 1994). According to Goroshit and Hen (2016), teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy tend to accept students with special needs into their classrooms with ease. By contrast, teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy focus on the strong students and see the struggling students as disruptive to the classroom (Aziz & Ouraishi, 2017; Crispel, 2017). Crispel (2017) claimed that a higher sense of self-efficacy among teachers impacts the amount of effort a teacher is willing to invest and the level of perseverance in coping with difficulties, obstacles, and negative experiences.

1.4 Level of Educational Counselors' Job Satisfaction

Various studies have defined contentment as an emotional reaction, a sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction. These studies also note that job satisfaction can lead to positive behavior (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Mathews, 2014; Mullen et al., 2017). The parameters leading to employee satisfaction include salary, promotion possibilities, interpersonal relations, and type of task (Thomas & Tymon, 1994). Roznho and Gilat (2017) suggested that the educational counselor's role carries significant stress factors with it, which may lead to overall discontent with the job. Mullen, Chae, Backer, and Niles (2021) suggested that the stress experienced by educational counselors is often the result of the multiple demands associated with their job. Distress and tension at work are an everyday experience. Stress is usually accompanied by worries, fear, and depression. Stress can also lead to fatigue, low productivity, and weaker performance (Mushtaq, 2018).

Bardhoshi, Schweinle, and Duncan (2014) reported that educational counselors whose roles entailed more professional duties experienced more success and were more contented and committed to their work. Maslow's Needs Theory hierarchy explored the various factors motivating human behavior (Maslow, 1970) and identified five groups of human needs: physiological needs, safety needs (physical and financial), social needs,

recognition, and appreciation and the need for self-actualization, which was ranked as the highest in the hierarchy. This need prompts individuals to seek out satisfaction and the fulfillment of their abilities. An employee's satisfaction can be expressed by both internal contentment and external contentment. Internal contentment is the effort the individual invests, personal achievements, involvement, control over work methods, responsibility, and challenge. External contentment refers to external sources such as recognition, feedback, promotion, salary, and bonuses (Alfahel et al., 2017; Thomas & Tymon, 1994). However, no study has examined self-efficacy, stress, and pressure among educational counselors with regard to inclusion (Chazan, 1994; Janney et al., 1995). This study was thus designed to explore six key questions:

- 1) What are the attitudes of elementary and junior high school educational counselors regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms?
- 2) Is there a correlation between the attitudes of elementary and junior high school educational counselors regarding inclusion of students with special needs and their level of job satisfaction?
- 3) Is there a correlation between educational counselors' sense of self-efficacy, sense of job satisfaction, and inclusion of students with special needs?
- 4) What type of stress and pressure do elementary and junior high school educational counselors experience when dealing with the inclusion challenges of students with special needs (uncommon disabilities)?
- 5) What difficulties do educational counselors experience in terms of the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classes in their schools?
- 6) How do educational counselors evaluate the inclusion of special education students both educationally and socially?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

One hundred and one elementary and junior high school educational counselors whose schools integrate students with special needs in mainstream classrooms were administered the quantitative part of the study. Of these, 11 educational counselors engaged in a semi-structured interview. The participants ranged in age from 27 and 61 with seniority ranging from 1 to 31 years (Mean=16, S.D.=5.03).

All these counselors work in mainstream schools where students with uncommon special needs are integrated such as students with sensory disabilities (blindness, deafness, etc.), developmental intellectual disabilities, autism, physical disabilities, rare illnesses and syndromes, developmental or language delay, and emotional as well as behavioral difficulties. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the educational counselors.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participants' Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Elementary school educational counselors	61	60%
Junior high school educational counselors	40	40%
Female educational counselors	93	92%
Male educational counselors	8	8%
Married	87	86%
Divorced	3	3%
Single	11	11%
BA	3	3%
MA	98	95%
Ph.D.	2	2%
With a background in special education	66	63%
No background in special education	38	37%

2.2 Measures

Two research methods were implemented in this study: a quantitative method where data were gathered using questionnaires, and a qualitative method, where data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires. As in Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (1990), a combination of these two methods completed and validated the data.

2.3 Quantitative Instruments

a. Demographic Questionnaire

The participants were asked to indicate their age, education, gender, religion, years of seniority, number of students with special needs attending the school and their characteristics.

b. General Self-Efficacy Scale (Gully & Chen, 1997)

This questionnaire is composed of 14 items representing the beliefs of the participants with regard to their abilities and achievement of goals. For example, "I believe I can be more efficient in different roles", or "When I face difficult tasks, I am sure I can execute them". Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "do not agree at all" to (5) "agree very much". The Cronbach's alpha in the original study was $\alpha=0.92$. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=0.97$.

c. Job Satisfaction and Commitment Questionnaire (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983)

This questionnaire examines individuals' level of commitment to their workplace and their satisfaction. The questionnaire is comprised of 23 statements, divided into several key areas: bonuses, for example: "Generally speaking, to what degree do you perceive your work to be satisfactory?"; costs deriving from work, for example: "To what extent, generally speaking, does your work entail difficulties?"; investment at work, for example: "Generally speaking, how much have you invested in your work?"; job alternatives, for example: "All things considered, how good are job alternatives compared to your current job?"; degree of satisfaction, for example: "All things considered, how content are you with your job?"; and commitment to work, for example: "How long would you like to

stay in this job?". In the original study the Cronbach's alpha for work bonuses was $\alpha=0.81-0.92$; costs deriving from work was $\alpha=0.58-0.86$; investment in work was $\alpha=0.75-0.80$; job alternatives was $\alpha=0.60-0.77$; commitment to work was $\alpha=0.88-0.93$; and degree of satisfaction from work was $\alpha=0.93-0.95$. Items are rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "not at all" to (9) "very much". In the current study, the overall Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=0.92$.

d. PSS - Scale Stress Perceived (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein, 1983)

This 14-item questionnaire assesses individuals' distress level on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "never" to (4) "very often". Some items relate to a general feeling of stress and recent distress such as: "To what extent have you felt nervous and stressed recently?". The remaining items examine the extent to which the individual feels able to cope with these feelings: "Recently, to what degree have you felt that things were happening according to your desires?" The Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha=0.84-0.86$. The general score is based on the means of the scores on each item, such that a high score indicates a high level of distress. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for the stress-related items was $\alpha=0.76$, and $\alpha=0.82$ for coping with stress.

e. ORM - Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (Leysere & Kirk, 2004)

This inclusion and educational assessment questionnaire was adapted for educational counselors for the purposes of the current study. The questionnaire consists of 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "highly disagree" to (5) "very much agree". The items are divided into positive and negative statements. The questionnaire was translated into Hebrew by Leysere and Romi (2005) and has been used frequently in Israel. The researchers reported a Cronbach's alpha $\alpha=0.82$. The adapted questionnaire consists of 14 statements, for example: "Inclusion prepares students with disabilities for real life", "In inclusion, students with disabilities receive less educational assistance", "Students with disabilities are likely to progress faster in a special education class than via inclusion". The Cronbach's alpha against inclusion was $\alpha=0.75$, and for items in favor of inclusion was $\alpha=0.89$.

2.4 Qualitative Method - Semi-structured Interview for Educational Counselors

Eleven educational counselors took part in a semi-structured interview to gain a better understanding of the participants' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special needs in their schools. The interviewees were asked a series of pre-defined questions, with a set, although flexible order that could be modified according to the interviewee and the evolving discourse. In the interview, the educational counselors were asked demographic, personal, social and systemic questions. For example: "How do you perceive the inclusion of students academically?"; "Do you experience difficulties or objections to inclusion from the staff, the students' families or the students (both students with special needs and their peers)?"; "Please provide an example of the additional challenges you face with regard to the inclusion process at school (such as budgetary challenges, school climate, quality of teaching and learning, etc.). The interviews were

conducted during a one-on-one meeting at the location of the interviewee's choice. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed with Narralyzer software (Shkedi, 2014). This software digitizes the data for further analysis. The analysis process consisted of several stages:

- 1) Formulation of an interview protocol, conducting interviews with experts and their transcription and a second reading of all the data. The purpose of this stage was to identify different patterns and segments of the data and obtain a full image of the data prior to assigning them to analysis units.
- 2) A mapping analysis where units are classified into categories from the protocol and the participants' responses.
- 3) After determining the categories that derived from the interviews, a "categorical tree" of the themes and sub-themes is formulated, to examine the links between them.
- 4) A summary table of the findings is created. This table includes the frequency of each theme and subtheme and helps pinpoint the main sub-themes.

2.5 Study Process

This study implemented a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology. The questionnaires were administered online. Participants signed a consent form and then filled out the questionnaires using an anonymous link that was sent to them via e-mail, WhatsApp, or social media platforms. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Open University. This study was conducted from December 2020 to February 2021. All responses were anonymous. The 11 educational counselors who took part in the interviews were contacted via snowball sampling. Three worked in secondary schools and eight in elementary schools.

2.6 Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The distributions, means and standard deviations of the variables were analyzed. To examine the correlations between the variables, Pearson correlations were conducted. The differences between groups for the different variables were examined using t-tests for independent samples.

3. Findings

3.1 Quantitative Findings

To examine the differences between attitudes in the elementary and junior high school counselors as regards inclusion in regular classes (N=101), t-tests were conducted.

Table 2 shows a significant mean difference between the attitudes in favor of inclusion in elementary school vs. junior high educational counselors, $t(97)=2.10$, $p=0.03$ with elementary school counselors more in favor of inclusion. No significant difference between elementary and junior high school counselors was found in attitudes against inclusion.

Table 2: Differences in attitudes toward inclusion in elementary school and junior high school educational counselors

	School type	Mean	S. D.	t-test
For inclusion	Elementary	3.65	0.67	2.10*
	Junior High	3.32	0.86	
Against inclusion	Elementary	3.00	0.72	-.049
	Junior High	3.01	0.74	

* $p < 0.05$

To examine the correlations between self-efficacy, job satisfaction and perceptions of inclusion, Pearson correlations analyses were conducted (see Table 3). Table 3 reports data for the entire sample without differentiating into school type.

The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between self-efficacy and attitudes favorable to inclusion, $r(99)=-0.24, p=0.01$, indicating that educational counselors with high self-efficacy did not tend to agree with negative attitudes towards inclusion. There was a significant negative correlation between self-efficacy and attitudes against inclusion in elementary school educational counselors, $r(58)=-0.27, p=0.04$. The correlation between self-efficacy and attitudes against inclusion in junior high school educational counselors was negative as well but not significant, $r(38)=-0.18, p=0.26$.

Overall, there was a significant positive correlation between job satisfaction and the self-efficacy score among educational counselors, $r(101)=0.316, p=0.001$. There was a significant positive correlation between the job satisfaction score and favorable attitudes toward inclusion $r(102)=0.219, p=0.027$, and a significant negative correlation between the job satisfaction score and attitudes against inclusion, $r(102)=-0.237, p=0.016$.

There was a significant positive correlation between the job satisfaction score and the self-efficacy score in elementary school counselors, $r(60)=0.286, p=0.027$, and junior high school counselors, $r(38)=0.346, p=0.034$. The correlation between job satisfaction and inclusion scores was not statistically significant for educational counselors at the elementary school.

There was a significant negative correlation between the job satisfaction score and attitudes against inclusion in junior high educational counselors, $r(40)=-0.36, p=0.02$, but a significant correlation between the job satisfaction score and favorable attitudes toward inclusion in junior high school counselors, $r(40)=0.259, p=0.106$.

Table 3: Correlations between counselors' sense of self-efficacy, sense of job satisfaction, and inclusion

	Self-efficacy Total	Job Satisfaction	For Inclusion	Against Inclusion
Self-efficacy Total		.316**	.005	-.24*
Job Satisfaction	.316**		.219*	-.237*
For Inclusion	.005	.219*		-.38**
Against-inclusion	-.24*	-.237*	-.38**	

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

3.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews was conducted using the Narralyzer (Shkedi, 2014) software. This section presents the themes identified in the qualitative analysis: difficulties faced by educational counselors (lack of sense of involvement, difficulties dealing with the staff and parents, budgetary problems, and difficulties identifying potential solutions), and their perceptions of these students both academically and socially (see Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of themes- qualitative analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Number of occurrences	Example
Difficulties reported by the educational counselors	Lack of sense of involvement	5	<i>"The school has no say. All of the students who are accepted, are accepted based on the decision of city hall or the municipal/Regional Support Center"</i>
	Difficulties dealing with the staff	6	<i>"Difficulties arise when a child is entitled to 25 hours for an aide, who doesn't work with him so it is not worthwhile, a therapist who changes each year, young inexperienced teachers, a social experience of rejection. It's hard"</i>
	Difficulties dealing with the parents	8	<i>"Some parents say: you don't do enough, the system does not understand what it is dealing with"</i>
	Budgetary problems	3	<i>"It's critical, it is like air for breathing, occupational therapy, communication... it's true that a blind student has an aide and a support teacher, but the student only gets 4 hours of Braille instruction, which is nothing. They are not encouraged academically. Where are all the funds for students with special needs? I have been in special education for many years. Where is all that money if they close down classes?"</i>
Educational counselor's perception of the students	Possible solutions	8	<i>Many students with special needs need to stay there, study in special education and then transfer. The parents are given a serious mandate and they do not know what to do with it, so the process needs to be backwards? This is the biggest mistake in the reform and the children pay the price".</i>
	Academically	8	<i>"A complex question. This fits some children more, they get the hours that they need. Other children whose parents decided they should be placed in a mainstream classroom have the same bank of hours left, which is not enough academically."</i>
	Socially	8	<i>"Also, not simple. It takes them time to connect... some children can't connect, don't want to, or they have a friend of two and that's it. Any attempt to connect them is not easy".</i>

3.3 Difficulties Faced by Educational Counselors

3.3.1 The Involvement of the Educational Counselor in the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

The educational counselors claimed that they had no influence over the decision of whether to assign students to regular classes or not. They can be involved in the decision to find the classroom that is most suitable for inclusion but the decision of where the student is placed is made higher up.

"I used to be on committees. It is up to the parent. That's why unsuitable children came to the school." (A)

Currently, parents have the right to decide where their child is placed; however, this decision often does not correspond to the student's academic abilities or social skills. With regard to the educational counselors' sense of their daily involvement with students with special needs in regular classrooms, the opinions were divided. While many stated they were highly involved, others stated that they only become involved if the teacher is unable to, or if the students are under the school's inclusion coordinator's responsibility.

"I am involved on a daily basis with some children, and with others, it is not necessary because their teacher is enough." (R)

Hence, the educational counselors appeared to believe their influence in deciding of whether to accept a weak student with special needs to a mainstream school is low. They do not feel as though they are part of the decision-making process. Furthermore, at times, the students' condition is inconsistent with the decision made for them.

3.3.2 Difficulties with the Staff and Parents

Some of the difficulties educational counselors face have to do with the staff, which needs to deal with heterogeneous classrooms, including assistants and paramedical staff. Difficulties also arise with the parents who, since the new legal reform, can decide where their child is placed.

"Wow. This is a very difficult case. It requires special preparation, it exhausts the teachers who are crying out for help!! They are placed and I have to cope..." (M)

ACH described the difficulties educational counselors face with assistants:

"More often than not the assistants themselves act like children and every little thing is an issue. They need to be the adult in charge of the child but they are unable to. Some aides are terrific but given the low budget, it's problematic. There isn't proper training for aides." (A)

The educational counselors also described difficulties with parents, which often stems from refusals to place their child in a special education framework.

"As far the parents are concerned, they do not want to transfer their child to a different school, it's convenient to them, they don't leave the classroom, there is no stigma and no objection to the inclusion... they are comfortable with this law of inclusion in the mainstream classroom." (N)

It is evident that educational counselors must cope with many different difficulties. They deal with the difficulties of the teachers who struggle to cope with the variety of populations in the classroom.

3.3.3 Budgetary and Systemic Difficulties

All the educational counselors stated that their schools have experienced budget problems as a result of the reform which affects the way they can respond to students' needs

"Budgets!! It is no surprise. 2.2 hours is nothing compared to the 37 hours of class time at our school. We try to give them private one-on-one hours, but it seems like there is no connection whatsoever between the ministry of education and the local authorities. This year, the aide started working in November... unbelievable." (N)

"I don't know what the connection is. The budget for inclusion is a joke. The children are integrated but the teachers are not given any tools!!! How do you integrate these children, we were not given any tools." (RO)

As can be seen, educational counselors experience frustration towards the system. They describe the minimal hours students with special needs require compared to the hours they are actually given and need to cope with. As far as they are concerned, the reform has only worsened the aid that students with special needs require and has led to a significant shortfall.

3.3.4 Potential Solutions

The educational counselors provided a wide variety of solutions, including having some of the children remain in special education, abrogating the parental mandate to choose their children's placement, providing homeroom teachers with practical tools, as well as preparing the staff and providing much-needed resources, such as a clearer division of roles; i.e., determining who is responsible for students with special needs, dividing the classroom into smaller groups, etc., all prior to the implementation of the legal reform. According to N, the law needs to be altered only after there has been a clear explanation and good preparation of the staff involved:

"The team needed to be trained before the law was altered." (N)

MH considered that small classrooms are a safe haven for these students:

"Smaller classrooms and of course additional resources for classrooms, adjacent rooms... so that the children know there is a place where they can relax..." (MH)

According to M, it is unclear who has responsibility for the children since role assignment is unclear.

"Who is responsible for them? The educational counselor? The teacher? What are our roles? There is no clear division... It is very unclear." (M).

R described situations where the budget and resource allocation is done automatically without considering specific children:

"In one classroom I have a deaf child, a child with behavioral problems, a child who pees, battles between divorced parents, a child with a syndrome, and one teacher who has to contain it all. The distribution is very uncaring." (R).

Thus, the educational counselors describe an overall sense of confusion and lack of clarity regarding their role.

3.5 Academic and Social Aspects of Inclusion

In terms of inclusion, the educational counselors perceived the success of inclusion to depend on the type of disability; for example, whether the child is integrated based on an evaluation of emotional, mental, sensorial, and communicative capacities. They felt that the legal reform has resulted in poor placement decisions.

"There is no one appropriate answer. I have a child who is brilliant, but he is very weak academically. He sits for hours, unable to do anything in the classroom, and only draws. The parents are OK with it, as long as the school integrates him." (MH)

When asked how social inclusion takes place, the educational counselors noted that integrated students often exclude themselves socially. Sometimes they are ashamed of their disability, and do not want to participate. MH stated:

"The integrated children are the ones who have been rejected by society." (MH)

According to R:

"There is a difficulty. The children themselves want to feel normal, and they are ashamed of their disability. They struggle with their hearing impairment and remove their device. The blind child touches other children. In terms of social skills, we teach both classroom and personal social programs. We intervene where necessary." (R)

The educational counselors presented the difficulty associated with students with a specific disability, compared to other populations where learning is relatively easy.

4. Discussion

The current study examined the attitudes and perceptions of educational counselors with respect to the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms, while also assessing their sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction and stress. The findings pointed to significant differences between the attitudes of elementary school and junior high school educational counselors, where the elementary school educational counselors took a more favorable approach towards inclusion. In junior high school, students encounter many educational figures, since teachers typically only teach one subject, whereas in elementary school there tends to be a single homeroom teacher. Thus, junior high school educational counselors have a more significant workload and receive more input about these students from a larger number of teachers. It is important to note that majority of teachers in mainstream education do not have a background in special education.

These results are consistent with Korkos and Korkos (2016), who examined the attitudes of educational counselors in the ultra-orthodox sector in elementary schools and high schools in Israel and found that educational counselors have positive attitudes towards inclusion. A study conducted in Finland indicated that elementary school teachers presented more favorable attitudes towards inclusion than junior high school teachers (Saloviita, 2020). By contrast, Bowen and Glen (1998) found that at times educational counselors lower their expectations toward students with special needs. Castillo (2016) found that educational counselors are often prejudiced towards students with disabilities, which may negatively impact their work. The interviews with the educational counselors led to the conclusion that inclusion should not be carried out at all costs. They described the various difficulties that arise from dealing with the system, they resent the fact that the legal reform was voted upon without consultations with homeroom teachers (Chiner & Cardona, 2013; Donnelly, 2010; Gavish & Shimoni, 2006; Saloviita, 2020), the lack of sufficient financial resources (Avramidis & Norwich, 2000; Chiner & Cardona, 2013) and the fact that the child may not always be suitable for a mainstream classroom (Sandler-Loeff & Naon, 1997). These difficulties place considerable strain on educational counselors.

Nevertheless, the educational counselors did not argue against the ethics of inclusion, but rather criticized the way it is implemented (presenting the reform, budgeting it, teacher readiness, etc.). The findings indicate that educational counselors with a higher sense of self-efficacy presented more positive attitudes towards inclusion. However, despite the high sense of self-efficacy described in multiple previous studies (Crispel, 2017; Soodak et al., 1998), difficulties and reservations with regard to actual inclusion, rather than to its ethical aspects, still exist (Crispel, 2017; Talmor & Kayam, 2010). This may indicate that greater cooperation between the various actors in the school system could lead to a higher sense of self-efficacy by enabling educational counselors to be more available to staff and students. The educational counselors in the current study

described situations in which they were flooded with different requests from various directions (the school staff, parents, students) they could not satisfy for budgetary reasons (too few hours, limited paramedical assistance). They resented the lack of assistance they receive, which may impact their self-efficacy and belief in their abilities.

There was a positive correlation between self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Educational counselors who reported more job satisfaction had a higher sense of self-efficacy. There was also a positive correlation between job satisfaction and support for the inclusion of students with special needs. On the one hand, the educational counselors reported strains affecting their sense of job satisfaction, including difficulties with the school staff, parents who prefer their child to be in mainstream education, assistants who do not perform their duties properly, distribution of hours, changes in paramedical staff, and most importantly, teachers who do not know how to cope with students with special needs. The latter has been investigated in studies internationally including Hong Kong, Spain and Japan (Chiner & Cardona 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). All the above causes educational counselors to feel as though they are alone. For example, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni and Steca (2003), reported that self-efficacy is a key factor in teachers' job satisfaction. Previous studies have examined this issue in teachers but not among educational counselors (Avanzi et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2019; Collie et al., 2012).

The sense of pressure and distress among elementary and junior high school educational counselors was a significant part of the interviews. Similarly, Mor and Lurie (2014) reported that the multiple students who require educational counselor's attention cause them to feel a significant strain. This is augmented by the fact that the teachers themselves often do not have the time to address these students' difficulties (due to the strain they themselves experience at work), leading to a sense of burnout among the educational counselors (Moyer, 2011; Wilczenski et al., 2010). The legal reform requires mainstream teachers with no background in special education to adapt their learning materials to students with special needs from different populations, as well as foster learning and social skills in heterogeneous classrooms (Armstrong, 2018; Heyder et al., 2020).

During the interviews, the educational counselors stated that in their view, the success of academic inclusion depends on the child's disability and that most of the integrated students are able to integrate academically. To date, there is no literature on the efficiency of academic inclusion from the perspective of educational counselors. However, studies have assessed academic difficulties among students with special needs from teachers' perspectives (Avissar, 2002; Bashara et al., 2008; Krämer et al., 2021). Socially, the interviewees reported that some of the difficulties stem from the disability itself. Several studies have indicated that students with disabilities may struggle to connect with their peers as a result of their disability (Bashara et al., 2008; Bossaert et al., 2013; Vlachou et al., 2016). Other studies, however, suggest that the actual integration in the classroom favors students with special needs socially (Arbouet Harte, 2010; Avissar, 2002). It is possible that in the eyes of the educational counselors, their social needs and related difficulties are more important than their academic difficulties.

4.1 Limitations

The current study has a number of limitations. Differences between educational counselors in large cities as opposed to outlying areas as well as differences between educational counselors in northern as opposed to southern Israel were not examined. The use of online questionnaires constitutes a limitation in terms of the data analysis regarding the number of questionnaires that were not returned. In total, roughly 500 emails were sent out but only 101 questionnaires were returned. Possible gender influences could not be examined since there were many more female than male counselors. There were different numbers of elementary school and junior high school educational counselors, thus making some results difficult to interpret.

4.2 Future Work

The findings point to the need to further study educational counselors in different sectors with varying years of experience. This can help to better assess educational counselors' needs and the difficulties they face. Future work should also examine why parents decide to integrate their children into mainstream education. This may help institutions provide better guidance to parents in making the choice that is most suitable for their children.

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