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Principal Leadership Styles and Teacher and Principal Attitudes, Concerns and Competencies regarding Inclusion

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine leadership styles of elementary school principals and their attitudes toward inclusion. The study also examined the perceptions of their teachers regarding the leadership style as well as teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, their concerns and perceived competencies needed for successful inclusion. Participants were 15 principals and 81 classroom teachers in the respective elementary schools in Israel. Most of the participants were women; most reported limited training in special education and some experience of teaching exceptional children. Three major leadership styles emerged by using the MLQ Questionnaire: Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Significant relationships were found between years of teaching in special education and leadership styles. Favourable attitudes towards inclusion as well as several concerns were also noted. Both principals and their teachers felt that they had major inclusion competencies. Several, however, received a low rating. The discussion and implications elaborate on the results and stress the need to develop more effective leadership styles at our elementary schools, develop more supportive attitudes and competencies and reduce the inclusion concerns.

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1. Introduction

The Special Education law in Israel (1988), and amendments to this law, guides the placement committees to favour the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms. Amendment 7 of this law (2002)

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emphasizes the right of the student to additional teaching and special assistance in general education facilities.

There are various factors and variables that contribute to the success of any inclusion program. One of the most important factors is the school principals' and teachers' attitudes toward students with special needs and the inclusion principle itself. The school principal is a central factor in the introduction and assimilation of any change or school reform such as inclusion and thus is the most important "change agent". The change agents are the connective link between the developers, the change initiators, and the clients, the change consumers. The action of school principals provide the legitimization needed for change and the psychological and practical support of teachers during the change process (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Many studies were conducted in order to describe different leadership styles and their effects on change processes in schools. Numerous studies focused on the characterization of the leadership style by documenting a vast number of behaviors (Thomas, 1978; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Binkley, 1997; Friedman, 1993; Shinman and Ben Perez, 1993). In recent years, more and more studies have focused on teachers' testimonies regarding the principals' behavior instead of only observing and documenting them. These studies (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997; Bifano, 1989; Duquette & O'Reilly, 1988) are based on the attribution theory, i.e. identifying the principal's leadership style by the way the teachers conceive his/her behavior.

There are various approaches in the literature regarding the relationship between leadership styles and introducing change in organizations and more specifically in the educational system. The classic approach (Stogdil, 1963) places the principal on a scale between task orientation and people orientation. Thomas (1978) identified three main types of school principals: 1. The Director who manages the administrative as well as educational contents. 2. The administrator who lets the teachers manage the educational contents and teaching methods while he/she manages the rest of the school's issues. 3. The facilitator who supports and assists the teachers and is more interested in the process and not the procedures.

Alongside Thomas's research (1978), a group of researchers from Texas (Hall, Rutherford, Hord & Huling, 1984) identified three types of leadership styles: 1. The responder who responds to the teacher's needs. He/she sees his role as mainly managing the teachers. 2. The manager who builds an organizational array which supports change. He/she is involved with daily management and leads the teachers' advancement. 3. The initiator who leads change and innovative processes. He/she has an inspiring personality, sets standards and prepares educational programs in accordance with the school's needs.

It is evident that the successful implementation of inclusion is largely dependent on the principal's Leadership style and attitude (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997). Avishar, Reiter and Leyser (2003) found that different leadership styles explain the difference in the implementation of the Special Education law for the inclusion of special education students in general education classrooms in Israel. They found that the majority of principals are seen by their teachers as having a managing and initiative style. The first type usually implements physical inclusion whereas the latter type usually implements social inclusion.

The understanding that inclusion is actually an educational reform led researchers who study the implementation of inclusion to adopt the viewpoint which emphasizes the principal's role in leading the change in schools (Guzman, 1997; Ingram, 1997; Rouse & Florian, 1996). Villa & Thousand (1995) described five traits necessary for a principal in order to implement change: having a vision, being qualified, being able to motivate, being able to recruit appropriate resources and to plan and instruct in order to make the school an inclusive school which provides educational services for all students. Avissar, Reiter and Leyser (2003) found by running queries on common databases (such as Academic Search, ERIC), that most studies from 1985-2002 dealt with the attitudes and perceptions of principals towards inclusion, while only a few dealt with actual actions taken by school principals.

The school principal is the most dominant factor in achieving the school's goals (Watts, 1980). The success of implementing any change or initiative in any organization depends first and foremost on the manager's leadership and ability to adapt to different situations (Friedman and Horowitz, 1998; Friedman, 1993; Fox, 1995). In this study we focused on the "Full Range Leadership" model (Bass & Avolio, 1997) which takes into account the relationships and behavior of the principal in different situations. The model consists of three leadership styles of school principals: "Laissez Faire" (LF) – no leadership; "Transactional style" – reinforcement or discipline, depending on teachers' performance; "Transformational style" – generating awareness or vision of the team, pushing followers to higher levels of ability by individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence. Bass & Avolio (2003) argued that leadership styles can be ranked, from lowest to highest:

Laissez Faire, Transactional and Transformational since it has been proven that there is a positive correlation between the transformational leadership style and high organizational performance.

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are affected by: a. the principal's leadership style (Avissar, Reiter and Leyser, 2003; Hemer, 1997; Dror & Weizel, 2003; Bandura, 1997); b. conceiving the principal as a change agent (Avissar, Reiter and Leyser, 2003); c. personal-professional background factors and d. the school's organizational background (Avissar, 2002; Umansky 1998; Oren, 2001; Klifeld, 2002).

Since an increasing number of special education students are currently included in general education classrooms, it is advantageous to study factors related to the successful implementation of inclusion. The purpose of this study was to examine leadership styles of elementary school principals and their attitudes toward inclusion. The study also examined the perceptions of their teachers regarding the leadership style as well as teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, their concerns and perceived competencies needed for successful inclusion. We also analyzed the different relationships between leadership styles, background variables (gender, age, experience, etc.) and the attitudes towards inclusion.

2. Methodology

The qualitative study was conducted by statistically analyzing questionnaires filled out by principals and teachers regarding the aforementioned issues.

2.1. Subjects

15 principals and 81 teachers in their elementary schools in Israel participated in the study. Most of the principals were females. All had an MA degree. Ninety percent had more than 10 years of teaching experience, yet most had less than five years of experience as principals. One third reported much experience in inclusive classrooms, while 53.3% reported some experience. Eighty percent did not have any training in special education. Most of the teachers were females. Almost all had BA or B.Ed. degrees. Sixty percent reported experience in inclusive classrooms. More than 80% had no or limited training in special education.

2.2. Instruments

- A Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was used to measure the range of leadership styles (Bass & Avolio, 1997). The questionnaire consisted of 36 general statements addressing the school principal's leadership style and the teacher's perception of his/her style.
- A demographic background questionnaire composed of basic background variables such as: gender, age, education, experience and special education training.
- An attitudes toward inclusion questionnaire composed of ten items that has been used in previous studies (e.g. Cohen & Leyser, 2004). This scale included 5 Likert-type items ranging from 1 ("do not agree") to 5 ("agree very much").
- A competencies scale composed of nine items measuring competencies/skills needed by educators for effective inclusion (Cohen & Leyser, 2004).

2.3. Statistical analysis

A basic statistical analysis including mean, standard deviation and prevalence was performed for each questionnaire and a weighted score was computed for each variable. In order to analyze the relationships between the various variables, we used Spearman's rank correlation.

3. Results

3.1. Leadership styles

Table 1. Means and SD's for principals and teachers on the MLQ.

	Teachers			Principals		
	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N
Transformational	0.64	4.04	81	0.59	3.98	15
Attributed charisma	0.67	4.14	81	0.74	3.90	15
Behavioral charisma	0.68	4.03	81	0.62	4.00	15
Inspirational motivation	0.70	4.05	81	0.67	4.00	15
Intellectual stimulation	0.70	3.96	81	0.57	4.00	15
Individualized consideration	0.69	4.02	81	0.61	4.00	15
Transactional	0.51	3.68	81	0.49	3.44	15
Contingent reward	0.66	4.02	81	0.54	4.00	15
Active management by exception	0.60	3.70	81	0.71	3.45	15
Passive management by exception	0.79	2.71	80	0.84	3.12	15
Laissez Faire (LF)	0.85	2.24	81	0.85	2.38	15

Principals' and teachers' ratings revealed a full range of leadership styles. The most prominent was the Transformational style (rating of about 4.00 on a 5 points scale), followed by the Transactional style (3.5), while the Laissez-Faire (LF) style was ranked the lowest (2.3).

3.2. Background variables and leadership styles

Table 2. Correlations between background variables and leadership styles.

	Transformational style	Transactional style	Laissez Faire	Total scale
Years of teaching experience	0.48	0.44	-0.45	0.48
	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001
Special needs teaching experience	0.11	0.06	-0.18	0.11
Special needs training participation	0.24	0.18	-0.27	0.23
	p<0.05		p<0.05	P<0.05

Positive correlations were found between years of teaching experience and Transformational and Transactional styles. A negative correlation is noted for the LF style. No significant correlations were found between special needs teaching experience and the three styles of leadership. Positive correlations were found between training/coursework in special education with Transformational leadership and with Transactional leadership while a negative correlation was found with the LF style.

3.3. Attitudes towards inclusion and inclusion competencies

Table 3. Means and SD's for total sample on attitudes towards inclusion scale.

Items	N	Mean	SD
Students with special needs should be in inclusion classrooms	96	3.65	0.93
Students with special needs should learn in a special class at a regular school and not a special school	96	3.89	0.93

The number of students in a class should be reduced if a special needs students learns in that class	96	4.15	0.95
I have the needed competencies to teach students with special needs	96	3.71	1.17
The inclusion in students with special needs consumes much time from the teacher	96	4.30	0.67
Regular school is the best framework for students with special needs with mild degrees of disability	96	4.04	0.78
Regular school is the best framework for students with special needs with moderate and severe disabilities	96	3.49	1.15
There is a need to change the teaching plan when there is a student with special needs in the class	96	3.78	1.00
The special reports and paper-work needed for students with special needs does not present a hardship for me	96	3.75	1.11
My experience with promoting students with special needs is positive	96	4.13	0.69

Table 4. Mean scores on inclusion competencies by principals and teachers on a 5 point Likert scale.

Considering students with special needs I have the competencies:	Mean Principals (N=15)	Mean Teachers (N=81)
Adapt materials	3.87	3.65
Adapt the curriculum	3.93	3.70
Cope with discipline problems by students with special needs	4.07	3.90
Give personal support to the student	4.14	4.12
Work with parents	4.27	3.99
Determine academic goals in the IEP	4.13	3.78
Understanding the results of diagnosis and evaluation of a student	4.20	3.81
Work in a team	4.27	4.21
Use of technological support	4.00	3.98

Scores on the 5-point scale revealed a supportive disposition towards inclusion in all items reflecting attitudes towards inclusion: scores varied between 3.65 and 4.13 (See Table 3). Participants also expressed several concerns about inclusion. Principals and teachers felt that they mastered several inclusion competencies that teachers ranked high: "providing students with individual support" (4.12) and "working in teams and with parents" (3.99). The lowest ranked were: "adapting materials and curriculum" (3.65; 3.70) and "Determining academic goals in the IEP" (3.78). The rankings of the principals were similar (See Table 4).

3.4. Background variables, attitudes and competencies

Table 5. Correlations between background variables, attitudes and competencies.

An example of a column heading	Attitudes	Concerns	Competencies	Total scale
Years of experience	-0.32 p<0.01	-0.01	-0.08	-0.30 p<0.01
Experience in teaching students with special needs	0.27 p<0.05	0.20	0.45 p<0.001	0.26 p<0.05
Participation in courses/training in special education	0.20	0.25 p<0.05	0.37 P<0.001	0.21

Negative correlations were found between years of teaching experience and attitudes. Positive correlations were noted between experience in teaching special needs students and attitudes. Positive correlation was also found between participation in courses/training in special education and between concerns and competencies.

4. Discussion and implications

Findings have shown a strong positive correlation between the principals' judgment regarding their leadership styles and the perceptions by teachers in their schools about those styles. Effective principals maintain daily interactions with their teachers, share their visions and support change. They assign tasks and delegate responsibilities while considering their needs and reward them for their performance. Moreover, years of experience were related to leadership style. More experienced principals displayed more effective and active leadership styles (i.e., Transformational & Transactional styles), while limited experience was translated into the passive and ineffective LF style.

Principals and teachers expressed similar positive views in support of inclusion. Support for the movement and philosophy of inclusion is also reported by other researchers. Findings have also shown that seniority (years of teaching experience) was negatively related to positive attitudes toward inclusion. Several other researchers also reported that teachers with fewer years of experience hold more supportive attitudes compared to more senior teachers (Dror & Weisel, 2003). One explanation is that younger teachers received more recent and updated preparation in special education. It was noted that teachers with a special education certificate held more positive views and more concerns and, as expected, reported more competencies compared to those with an elementary certificate (Cohen & Leyser, 2004).

As schools move into the 21st century and go through major transformations including the inclusion reform, among many other reforms, strong and effective leadership styles of principals are required. More attention should be given to the development of Transformational and Transactional Leadership behaviors in pre-service and in-service programs for principals. Also, there is a need to provide more information about special education (more than half reported only some experience in leading the inclusion reform and 80% reported no training in special education content).

Teachers supported inclusion overall, but expressed concerns about their role. They also expressed an uncertainty whether they mastered some important competencies needed for inclusion (namely, developing IEP goals). More than 80% also did not participate in any training in special education. These findings suggest that at the pre-service level in teacher training colleges, more information and working skills with special needs students should be stressed across the curriculum and during field experiences. A single course is not enough. All students, not just special education students, should get a comprehensive and diverse set of courses stressing diversity and exceptionality.

Additional studies on principal Leadership styles and teachers' attitudes and competencies regarding inclusion should be carried out in other school districts and countries.

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