



Changing Teachers' Perceptions towards Promoting the Social Conduct of Students with Visual Impairment

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Abstract

The article presents the evaluation of an Israeli training program for in-service support-teachers of students with visual impairments (VI) focused on the social conduct of this children. The program combines interactive sessions of acquiring knowledge, teaching skills and professional tools with a process of empowering the teachers' perceptions towards promoting the students' social conduct. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their Role, sense of Self-efficacy and Motivation to promote the social conduct of their students, following the teachers' participation in the program. The research includes three studies in which data was collected sequentially from both quantitative and qualitative methods. This article presents only the quantitative findings, which were obtained before, at the middle and at the end of the program. The findings revealed significant changes in the teachers' perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy during the program. The findings also show significant positive correlations between teachers' perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy and positive correlations between teachers' perceptions of their identified motivation and both sense of self-efficacy and role perception. The main conclusion arises from the research is that teachers' perceptions of their role and self-efficacy towards promoting the social conduct of students with VI can be enhanced through an interactive and empowering training program tailored to the teachers' needs. Another conclusion is that enhancing the teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy through training program can increase their perceptions of the importance of their role. The findings can contribute to advance programs in the social field for teachers in general and special education, and to encourage more studies in that important field. The research is a part of a PhD research.

Key words: Identified motivation; role perception; self-efficacy; social conduct; students with visual impairment; training program

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1. Introduction

The article presents initial findings of a program evaluation research which examines the effectiveness of a new Israeli training program for in-service support-teachers of students with Visual Impairments (VI), being included here students with all kinds of vision impairments and blindness ("Vision impairment and blindness," 2017). The explored training program focused on improving the students' social conduct by their support-teachers, teachers who provide for each student with VI and for his school educational staff, a complete support system in regular schools ("Professional development in special education", n.d.).

1.1 Research Background

In order to encourage the integration of people with disabilities into the society many countries adapted a policy of integration of students with disabilities (including VI) into regular schools (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018). The literature emphasizes that there is a great need to encourage not only the educational integration, but also the social integration of students with special needs including students with VI (Celeste & Kobal Grum, 2010; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2010, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Whitburn, 2014). This idea leads the integration policy in Israel and in other countries worldwide. Moreover, the situation in regular schools is more complex, students with disabilities including VI having social challenges and difficulties (Reiter & Schalock, 2008; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013). Students with VI face a major challenge, since they cannot gain social skills through incidental learning, primarily because many of the social gestures develops on the basis of visual hints rather than based on speech (Kekelis et al., 1997; Riggio, 2006; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). Therefore, students with VI have often complications to create and maintain inter-personal relations with others, especially with peers without disabilities (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2015; Khadka et al., 2012; Sacks & Gaylord-Ross, 1989). In addition, students with VI have difficulties in obtaining social skills that allow the development of autonomy and independence (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2010, 2015; Kekelis et al., 1992; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). Therefore, it arises the necessity for promoting these students' social conduct and encouraging their autonomy by their teachers at regular schools (Davis, 2003; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006; Whitburn, 2014).

On the other hand, the literature emphasizes a lack of teachers' knowledge, capabilities and skills required to advance the social conduct of students in general and particularly of students with special needs in regular schools (Dobbins, 2007; Durlak et al., 2015; Pavri & Hegwer-DiVita, 2006; Sazak & Sucuoglu, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), including students with VI (Hess, 2007, 2015; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). Due to that, there is a great need for teachers' preparation towards promoting the students' social conduct using different ways such as training programs for pre-service and in-service teachers, mentoring and sustaining the ongoing professional development in that field (Brabeck et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

These findings are consistent with the situation in Israel, where the teachers who support students with VI reported lack of knowledge and skills to promote the social conduct of their students (Hess, 2007, 2010, 2015). This situation led to the initiative of a training program in the social field, developed by the Israeli Ministry of Education for in-service support-teachers (teachers that provide support to students with VI in inclusive schools). The program is based on the idea that there is a clear connection between the teachers' level of confidence and self-efficacy to advance the students' social conduct and the students' readiness and motivation to be proactive in the social field. The program combines interactive sessions of acquiring knowledge, teaching skills and professional tools with a process of empowering the teachers' perceptions towards promoting the students' social conduct.

Moreover, literature review also describes that positive changes in the teachers' perceptions about their roles improve their performance (Caprara et al., 2006; Choi & Lee, 2018; Roth et al., 2007; Zee et al., 2016), including their performance with regards to promoting the social conduct of their students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Based on that, it is crucial to explore the training program effectiveness and its contribution to the support-teachers' perceptions to promote the social conduct of students with VI.

1.2 Problem Statement

Literature review reveals that there is lack of knowledge which explores the results of the training programs for teachers of students with VI. Most of the available literature on training programs and on academic education for these teachers focuses on pedagogical aspects and not on the social aspects (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Hess, 2007, 2010, 2015; Humphrey, 2013; Kekelis et al., 1997; Khadka et al., 2012; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). In addition, very limited research was found regarding the effectiveness of training programs for teachers of students with VI in general and in particular in the social field. To try to fill this gap in knowledge, this article will present initial findings of a research which explores the contribution of an Israeli support-teachers' training program in the social field. As described above, the literature emphasizes that positive changes in the teachers' perceptions of their roles promote their performance (Roth et al., 2007; Zee et al., 2016), including their performance in the social field (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). However, not much research was found regarding these findings in relation to teachers of students with VI.

The uniqueness of this research consists in the examination of the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their role, self-efficacy and motivation towards advancing the social conduct of students with VI following their participation in a training program focused on the social field. The motivation for this research is to obtain insights about the Israeli training program effectiveness and to use the findings to render the explored program. The findings can also be used for enhancing other training programs in that field and to encourage more studies in that important field. The insights of the study can be adapted to training programs of teachers for students with other disabilities, as well as in other countries and cultures.

1.3 Research questions

The research key question is, what will be the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their role, sense of self-efficacy and motivation towards advancing the social conduct of students with VI, following their participation in the training program. This key question includes three questions, each one explores different perception:

a) Support-teachers' role perception

What will be the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their role to enhance the social conduct of students with VI following their participation in the program?

b) Support-teachers' sense of self-efficacy

What will be the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy to enhance the social conduct of students with VI following their participation in the program?

c) Support-teachers' motivation

What will be the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions of their motivation to enhance the social conduct of students with VI following their participation in the program?

1.4 Purpose of the study

The first research purpose is to evaluate the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions towards enhancing the social conduct of students with VI following their participation into the

training program. This purpose includes three aims, each one examines different perception: Role perception, sense of Self-efficacy and Motivation.

The second research purpose is to evaluate the changes in the teachers' perceptions of their students' social conduct following the teachers' participation in the training program.

2. Methods

The method used in this research is mixed methods which includes sequential qualitative and quantitative studies. This article presents the initial findings of the quantitative study, exploring the changes in the teachers' perceptions regarding their role, sense of self-efficacy and motivation to advance the social conduct of students with VI. The quantitative tools used were three questionnaires, since questionnaires offer an effective way to measure the contribution of a 'treatment' by using comparison study called 'longitudinal study' (Coolican, 2014) in which the participants are measured over time in order to evaluate the changes.

2.1 Research participants

The research participants were sixty-five support-teachers at the beginning of their career as support teachers at the Israeli ministry of education. Twenty-seven of them participated in the training program and they were used as a study group. Thirty-eight of them did not take part in the training program and they were used as a control group. The research study group selection was done according to the 'Cluster sample' of the Equal Probability Selection Method (EPSEM) which means a group in the population chosen at random from several similar groups and expected to be typical of the population (Coolican, 2014). In this research the 'Cluster sample' was the current class of the training program.

All the participants worked as support teachers for less than three years. Many of them had additional experience as teachers in general education or special education.

2.2 Research instruments

The research questionnaires were structured based on questionnaires measuring the main constructs (Role perceptions, Self-efficacy and Motivation, respectively), with adaptations to the research topic and objectives. This adaptation was performed using the findings of the focus group with experts performed before. All the questionnaires passed a process of content validity which included two phases: Experts judgment and Pre-test. The Reliability for each questionnaire was computed and was found satisfactory (Crombach's Alpha more than 0.70). Discriminant validity was examined by inter-correlations between the different categories of each one of the questionnaires, displaying that there is a linkage, common meaning, between the categories, but each category has an exclusive meaning.

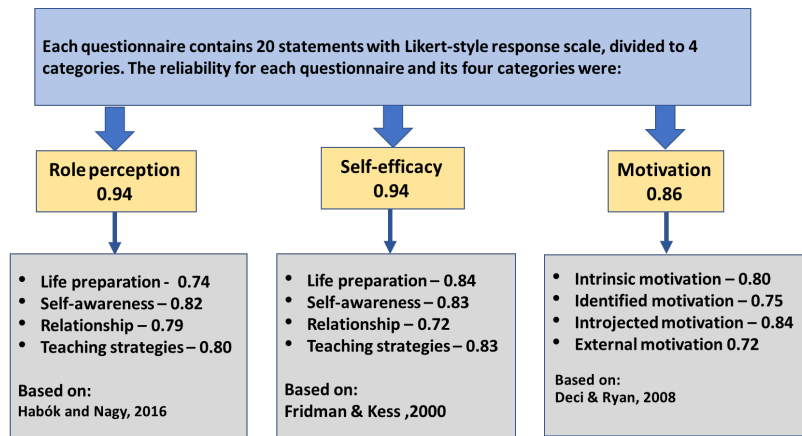


Figure 1. Perceptions questionnaires: Reliability per category and per whole questionnaire

2.3 Research design

As a 'longitudinal study' (Coolican, 2014), the study group (the participants in the training program) were examined by using the same set of questionnaires over time in four measurements: before the program, in the middle, at the end and six months after the end of program. The findings of the study group were compared with the findings of the control group, which were used as a baseline measure of behaviour without treatment (Coolican, 2014; Creswell, 2018). The control group was examined by using the same set of questionnaires over time in two measurements: before the program and six months after the end of the program.

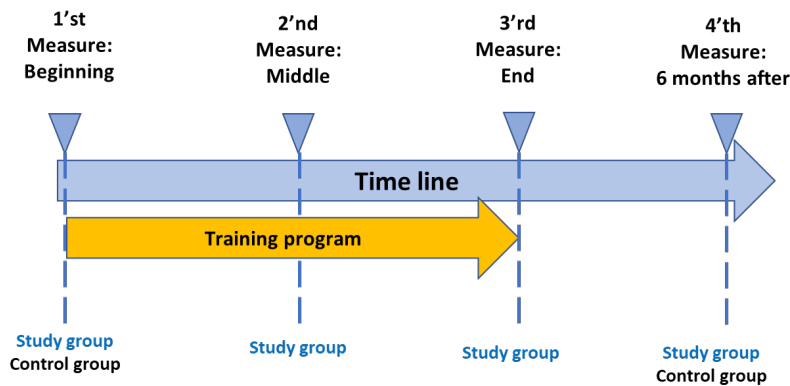


Figure 2. Research design

3. Results

The findings described in this article are based on the first three measurements. The follow up measurement was not done yet and is not included. The findings are presented according to each explored type of perception, followed by presenting the relationships between the three types of perceptions. In order to compare study and control groups at the beginning on the explored perceptions, T-test was conducted and revealed no significant differences between the two groups. The groups share the same level of perception of their role, sense of self-efficacy and motivation before the beginning of the program.

3.1 Support-teachers' perceptions of their Role

Although the levels of perceived importance were very high for all the categories (higher than 5 in a six-point-scale) at the first measurement, the MANOVA analysis yielded significant increase in the total score of the teachers' perceptions of their role and significant increase in the category of 'Relationship' throughout the program.

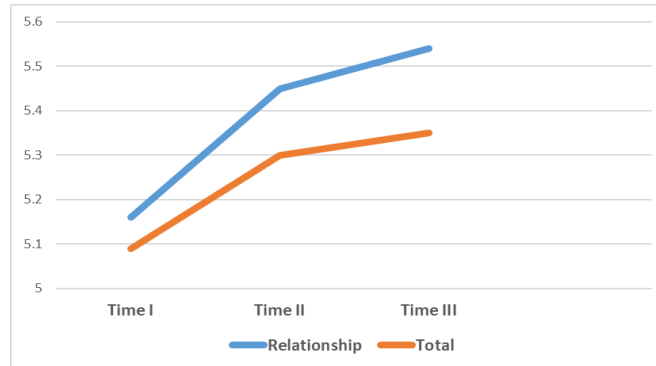


Figure 3. Comparison of the three measurements of relationship category and the total score of role perception

3.2 Support-teachers' perceptions of their sense of Self-efficacy

The MANOVA test yielded a significant effect of time in all the categories of sense of self-efficacy and in the total score. The Support-teachers' perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy increased in each measurement through the program.

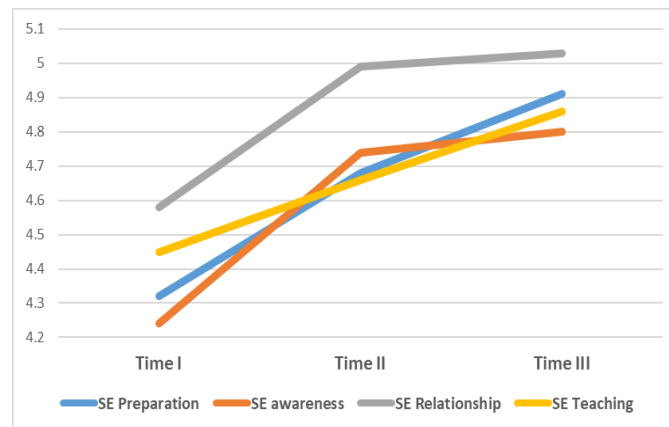


Figure 4. Comparison of the three measurements of self-efficacy

The analysis yielded a significant effect of time in all the categories of self-efficacy and in the total score. The teachers' perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy increased from the measurement before the program began to the middle measurement and from there – to the end of the program.

3.3 Support-teachers' perceptions of their Motivation

On the other hand, the MANOVA test revealed that no significant changes were found between the three measurements with regards to all types of motivation and the total score i.e., the level of teacher's perceptions of their motivation did not change through the program. A possible

explanation is that most of the motivation types emerge from the personal needs of the teachers, and as such they are less affected by the program. Only identified motivation originates from professional understanding of the students' needs and as such can be affected by the program.

3.4 Relationships between the three perceptions

In order to review the relationships between support-teachers' perceptions of their role, sense of self-efficacy and motivation to advance the social conduct of students with VI, Pearson correlation was computed. The analysis yielded a significant positive correlation between self-efficacy and role perception i.e., an increase in the perceived importance of the teachers' role is associated with an increase in the teachers' perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy. The teachers' perceptions of their motivation were not significantly related to both sense of self-efficacy and role perception. A deeper examination of the relationship was conducted by examining the correlations between each type of motivation and the total score of role perception and self-efficacy.

The findings revealed significant correlations between the category of identified motivation with self-efficacy and role perception. These findings show that support-teachers who identify with the values and the goals of their role as support-teachers, display higher levels of perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy.

Conclusions

The current findings show that the training program improved the support-teachers' perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy towards promoting the social conduct of students with VI. The main conclusion arises from the research is that teachers' perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy towards promoting the social conduct of students with VI can be advanced through an interactive and empowering training program tailored to the teachers' needs. Another conclusion is that enhancing the teachers' perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy through training program can increase their perception of the importance of their role.

Additional conclusion refers to the importance of the identified motivation type and the internal dynamics between this type of motivation and the teachers' perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy. The practical implication that can be drawn from that conclusion is: if we cultivate the identified motivation of the teachers, it may raise their level of perceptions of their role and sense of self-efficacy. This increase of the teachers' perceptions can contribute to enhance their teaching practice in the social field as described in literature.

Future directions

The research will continue to examine the changes in the support-teachers' perceptions in a follow up measurement (6 months after). For deeper understanding of the changes in the support-teachers perceptions following their participation in the program, in-depths interviews with teachers graduated from the explored training program will be conducted. The research will integrate the quantitative findings with the qualitative insights acquired through in-depths interviews with support-teachers participated in the explored training program and through focus group discussions with experienced support-teachers graduated the program in the last three years.

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