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**Education Students with Special Needs Meet
the Academic Staff for an Authentic and Open
Discussion of Difficulties in Academia**

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Education Students with Special Needs Meet the Academic Staff for an Authentic and Open Discussion of Difficulties in Academia

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The literature that deals with the relationships between teachers and students with disabilities in higher education mainly emphasizes that those complicated relationships started from elementary school. Students with disabilities have unique needs that require adaptation processes and adjustments. However, they often hesitate to engage or share their concerns and challenges. Kendall & Tarman (2016) identified the staff as unaware of students' disabilities, unwilling to make reasonable adjustments, and tend not to offer an alternative assessment of their abilities and achievements. Furthermore, the accommodations require extra effort and flexible thinking by the lectures. Those circumstances can create a "muted discourse" between students and their lectures. As the professional staff of the Support Center at the David Yellin Academic College of Education, we offer students with disabilities a variety of support and empowerment services during their academic studies. The center provides various services the student may need, both in the academic and personal-emotional worlds. Despite our effort to respond to the various needs of students with disabilities, we find ourselves daily dealing with complicated relationships between those students and their lecturers. Trying to deepen the understanding of the difficulties and improve their discourse, we offer each faculty in our college to meet their students with disabilities in a workshop based on a format taken from the Australian ABC original series: "You Can't Ask That". This innovative format confronts prejudices and breaks down taboos in an authentic way. In each episode, a group is asked to respond and share honestly to uncomfortable questions they are afraid to ask or hear all the time. Their answers reflect a range of emotions and challenges about life with differences. In our workshops, based on this format, we ask the lecturers questions like: "what are the difficulties for you to teach students with disabilities? How do you deal with those difficulties? Moreover, the students were asked, for example: what are your difficulties in your study and how do you overcome them? Both the questions and the answers to those questions broke the "muted discourse" and enabled both sides to open themselves, listen attentively to each other, and even cooperate to find creative solutions.*

Keywords: *inclusion, higher education, dialog, special education, difficulties in academia*

"I spent hours upon hours reading all the articles to the exam. Unfortunately, despite all my efforts, I failed. I'm not stupid!"

The subject of higher education students' struggles with a wide range of disabilities that include learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, chronic illnesses, mental health struggles, various sensory disabilities and communication disabilities are known to all and has become one of the most studied subjects over the last few decades. Thus, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that every human being has a right to education, to which Wickens and Sandlin (2007) added that this right can be realized by the full containment of children along with adults, while Morley and Croft (2011) emphasized that students with special needs require mentoring and support in the transition between educational settings, including higher education.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the UN's Education for All initiative, legislation, regulations and policies around the world can all be seen as the factors that led to the integration of many students with special needs in mainstream education systems. Over the last two decades, more and more students with special needs have completed their studies in secondary education and integrate in post-secondary institutions (Greenberger & Leyser, 2008). Experts estimate that about 6% to 9% of all higher education students today are students with disabilities, with the largest group being students with learning disabilities (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006).

In Israel, the Margalit Report (Margalit, Breznitz and Aharoni, 1998) as well as the Friedman and Younes Report (2001) join the global trend and indicate an increase in the number of students with special needs who join institutions of higher education in Israel each year. In addition to them, Greenberger and Leyser (2008) also declare that there is increased awareness to the subject of the integration of students with special needs in institutions of higher learning. They list many articles that report the activities of support centers for students with special needs in general, and students with learning disabilities in particular, that have witnessed accelerated growth over the last decade. Support centers have been established out of the insight that these students should be assisted in a variety of ways in order to prevent future drop-out, to help them successfully complete the course of their studies and to help them integrate into the job market. The support offered in these centers is both academic, emotional and social.

El-Dor (2014) mentions the law regarding the rights of students with disabilities in post-secondary institutions of higher learning in Israel. According to her, the law states that candidates for post-secondary education and full-time students with learning disabilities are eligible for accommodations that will allow them to utilize their skills and abilities to the fullest and to be integrated in the higher education system in Israel. The main part of the law focuses on three subjects: -1 protocols for the reception of accommodations: In the admission exams, including in the psychometric exam, in the examination methods and in the submission of academic assignments over the course of study; -2 The establishment of support centers for students with learning disabilities and/or with

attention deficit disorders in post-secondary institutions; -3 The regularization of the diagnosis of learning disabilities: The definition of what constitutes an "accredited diagnosis" and who is considered to be an "accredited evaluators".

Nevertheless, the success of students with learning disabilities and disabilities in higher education does not lie solely with the students' efforts, with physical accessibility and with the availability of services provided on campus, but to a large extent also with the teaching staff's knowledge, attitudes towards this student population and especially their willingness to make accommodations to their teaching staff and evaluation methods in their classrooms, laboratories and field practice sessions (Burgstahler, 2005).

The findings of the studies that studied the attitudes of teachers towards students with learning disabilities are inconsistent. Thus, for example, Houck et al. (quoted in Greenberger and Leyser, 2008) report negative attitudes by academic staff members. Scott and Gregg (ibid) report inconsistent attitudes, both negative and positive. In contrast, a significant amount of all studies report positive attitudes. Lipka et al. (2019), for example, report that in Israel there are positive attitudes towards students with special needs, but that many times the teaching staff lacks knowledge and strategies when dealing with this population (Lipka, Khouri & Shecter-Lerner, 2019).

Talmor and Kayam (2006) reviewed a sample of students with learning disabilities who have been studying in a pre-academic preparatory program and found that students attributed their successes, among other things, to factors related to the teachers who taught them, the teaching methods and the learning strategies that the teacher integrated in instruction alongside his or her educational approach and attitude towards the students. The students in this study emphasized that the supportive and nurturing educational environment, that comes into play with the quality of the teachers, the large number of teaching hours, monitoring and nurturing, individual guidance, ongoing communication with the student and enrichment activities, played a major role in their success in the pre-academic program.

In light of the findings described by Talmor and Kayam (2006), Greenberg and Leyser (2008) too recommend that the support centers will initiate joint surveys along with the teaching staff and the administration of the academic establishment. It is recommended to involve the staff and to encourage them to conduct studies on subjects related to disorders and disabilities. Joint scholarly work between the staff and the support centers may increase awareness about the attitudes of the teaching staff and the teaching methods designed to assist students with disorders or disabilities in institutions of higher education.

Despite recognition of the difficulties and the moral and legal obligation to provide support to students who cope with disorders and disabilities, the actual situation in many institutions is far from ideal. Thus, for example, Kendall and Tarman (2016) mention the academic staff's reluctance to make accommodations in their teaching and evaluation practices and to show some cognitive flexibility. Kruse and Oswal (2018), as well as Mullins and Preyde (2013) mention findings that students with non-visible disabilities receive fewer accommodations from the teaching staff.

In the study conducted by Lipka et al. (2019) it was found that most academic staff members were unaware of the definition of a learning disability and in many cases they were completely unaware of the support center on campus and the services that it provides. The academic staff reported that they did not participate in training sessions on the subject of disabilities but expressed their willingness to participate in workshops that the support centers will organize that can provide them with necessary information on learning disabilities and accommodating teaching methods. In their study they also mention the findings of other scholars that lecturers who underwent training programs on this subject have shown greater willingness to make accommodations and actually provided greater support to students with special needs (Leyser et al., 2011 and Abdella, 2018, cited in Lipka et al., 2019).

While the policy on students' right to accommodations and support services is being enforced and realized, a certain key component is missing. In practice it seems that there's a gap between the way that the theory is understood and realized. Many students are apprehensive to share their challenges with the academic staff. From their perspective, academic staff members are not always aware of the specific needs of their students and not always interested in an in-depth assessment of their students' specific needs and in offering them alternative evaluation that will be more compatible with their students' specific needs.

Today there are two main models for supporting students with disabilities in post-secondary education. The first model is the accommodations model currently in practice in Europe, North America and Israel, that requires the establishment of a support center on campus that will provide accommodations to each student on the basis of diagnosis and specific needs. The second model is the universal design (UD) model, aimed at creating learning environments that are better suited to accommodate all learners and designing structures that take into account the physical and sensory needs of all potential users. Some Canadian and American institutions have already communicated their commitment to the UD and noted the model's clear link with sustainability (McGill Office for Students with Disabilities, 2015, cited in Lipka et al., 2019).

In the spirit of the claims by Sallan and Suarez (2016) and Moraña (2017) that universities should take responsibility for the needs of the students learning within their premises, it was very important to us, as representatives of the dean of students' office and the support center, to help the students make their faint and often marginalized voices heard and to promote an authentic discourse between them and the academic staff in the College that will allow them to bring up their difficulties and to allow for an open, containing and respectful discussion about possible solutions to the difficulties raised. This type of discussion is consistent with the models developed by Kozminsky (2004). Who came up with the concept of self-advocacy and built a unique program designed to help students make their voices heard, as well as the model by Bergman and Cohen (1994) who stress the importance of equal communication in the dialogue between the parties.

In light of all of the points above, this article will present a successful work model designed to lead a common change in teaching students with special needs who meet their teachers for an authentic and open discussion of

their academic difficulties in David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem.

David Yellin Academic College of Education was founded in 1913. The College's population reflects the rich human tapestry of Israeli society. Orthodox and secular Jews, Muslim and Christian Arabic speakers and new immigrants from around the world learn and teach in this College.

The College offers various academic programs – bachelor and master degrees in various educational and therapeutic fields and professional enrichment courses for educational staff, teachers and the general public. The College's grounds also offer therapeutic clinics that open their gates to the children of the city.

Some 3,045 students study in the college, of which 827 are affiliated with support center for students with a variety of special needs: Learning disabilities (388), attention and deficit disorders (172), physical disability (23), sensory disabilities (11), chronic health problems (51) and mental health issues (60). In terms of assistance, out of the total population of students eligible for accommodations, 90 receive academic assistance and 15 receive assistance through personal training (coaching).

The support center offers various support services, including personal tutoring, learning strategy courses and workshops ahead of the examination period, accommodations in exams and in academic assignments, personal training and psychotherapy.

The Model

According to the situation on the scene, it seems that students are usually apprehensive to share their difficulties and challenges due to concerns over the adverse effects to their academic future and possible confrontation with the teaching staff. For their part, the staff lack awareness of the necessary accommodations and the rights of students with special needs. Some staff members are also reluctant to make accommodations to their teaching and evaluation methods to make them compatible with their students' needs.

An initiative model named "Excuse Me for Asking" was created out of need. The idea was inspired by the Australian television series, "You Can't Ask That", every episode of which aims to focus on a different unique population, introduce it and allow for dialogue between this population's representatives and the general public using guiding questions.

In David Yellin College, within the framework of the various programs and in collaboration with them, we created focus groups that include academic staff and students who are affiliated with the support center due to their diagnosis and who have agreed to be exposed. We presented three questions to the groups:

- **To the students** – What is your main challenge in communication with your teachers?
- **To the staff** – What is your main challenge in communication with your students?

- **To both students and staff** – Tell us about one thing that helped you cope with these challenges.

At the time of the publication of this article, three meetings took place as part of the series of meetings. Two tracks have participated so far. In each track the number of participants was different but in both cases the groups were relatively small – a group of teachers or pedagogical instructors and a number of students who have agreed to be exposed. Furthermore, we as staff members from the dean of students' office and the support center coordinated and facilitated these meetings. An additional focus group was various teachers, heads of programs and students with special needs who are affiliated with the support center and who study in various programs and in various years of in their programs. The goal of the focus group was to bring together a variety of voices and opinions both among the students and among the teaching staff. In order to create an atmosphere conducive to an authentic discussion, the meetings opened with an assembly in which the support center and its various services were introduced to the academic staff, and then the group divided into separate discussion rooms that contained a small number of participants. Usually the composition in these discussion rooms was 2-3 teachers and 2-3 students and 2 staff members from the support center. After a discussion that revolved around the three main questions of the model, the smaller groups reconvened as an assembly in order to discuss the insights that emerged from the discussion. At the end of the meeting an open platform was provided to staff and students to share with one another the feelings that arose in them during the meeting and to discuss possibilities and opportunities that emerged as a result of the meeting's insights.

Several important issues arose from the meeting between students and teachers, such as: How much they are willing to expose their challenges to the academic staff, the students' experiences, needs and the assistance that they received. Below are some examples:

Students' voices from the meeting:

Experiences of Students with Special Needs

Students usually describe uneasy experiences. Examples below:

Female student, 2nd year, early childhood education track: "Nobody wants to listen to me, to what I feel and think. It was easier to deal with attention deficit disorders in childhood. The staff treated me as if I'm odd and weird. If I could, I would've taken pictures of their faces".

Female student, 3rd year, elementary education track: "They don't know what I'm going through, how loud it feels, how disruptive it is. It's like hundreds of butterflies are flying in my head all at once. They don't understand me, accept me or get me. For me, academic studies are an everyday struggle".

Male student, 1st year, complex disabilities track: "I spent hours upon hours reading all the articles to the exam. Unfortunately, despite all my efforts, I failed. I'm not stupid!"

Students Talk About Their Difficulty to be Exposed as "Students with Special Needs"

Many of the participants talk about their difficulty to be exposed as "students with special needs".

One set of challenges is related to the practical work in the field of education – how much should they expose their difficulties, such as spelling errors, to the children that they teach.

Over the course of the meeting there was a touching exchange between two female students with special needs who participated in the meeting and who did not know each other personally. One asked the other why did she hide the fact that she has a learning disability. The other answered that she did not want to teachers to know and to try and go easy on her.

A female student, 3rd year, early childhood education program, testifies: "I am constantly walking around with the feeling that the teacher looks at me like I'm lazy, like I have a mark of shame stamped upon my forehead." She adds: "You (the teaching staff) only know us for 3-4 years, but this is a lifelong experience". Another powerful statement that she made is: "They have already determined about me things that I didn't know about myself yet".

Students Talk About Their Needs

In light of the containing discussion, students opened up to bring their various needs before the teachers.

A female student, 3rd year, special education track, testifies: "It's not always possible to solve (problems) but (the teacher's) care and humanity matters." She adds: "The need to share is unpleasant. Sometimes the teachers were not attentive enough when I came to talk." She noted that: "When I said that I'm having a hard time, the teachers answered that I slack off". She explained that sometimes it is very difficult for her to meet the requirements because the assignments are weekly and preparing them takes her a very long time. She shared her feelings that the teachers think that she's just complaining.

A female student in the complex disabilities track noted that sometimes it is difficult to share her challenges with the teacher, especially in the beginning of the school year. She expressed her wishes that the teacher will show his or her willingness to contain students with special needs and invite them to expose their difficulties to him or her in a personal talk.

Students Talk About the Assistance

Along with the difficulties, the students also share strategies that assisted them to cope with their challenges.

A female student in the early childhood education track who is currently in her internship year remembers how her tutor taught her an effective strategy to deal with multiple-choice questions in the exams, a strategy that helped her greatly.

Another female student, 3rd year, early childhood education track, recalls how she stressed out during the exam at the end of the course and how it affected her ability to recall the learned material. She said that her teacher approached her, calmed her down, sat with her and explained the questions to her. The student testifies that despite her fears that she will be unable to answer the open questions, she managed to answer them reasonably well. The student summarizes: "While I may have learning disabilities, I can get by with a teacher that lends me a listening ear out of genuine understanding, a teacher who really sees your distress. That there's someone who sees you".

It is possible to summarize the students' voices with one powerful statement by one of the older students: "Look at me, get to know me and I'll feel safe to tell you".

The teachers' voices:

Among the teachers as well the voices can be divided into several corresponding categories: Experience vis-à-vis a student with special needs, what they need from the student, suggestions from a system-wide perspective.

Teachers' Needs Vis-à-Vis the Students

Only a minority of teachers was able to pin-point exact needs vis-à-vis students with special needs.

One of the teachers said that from her perspective, it is better that the students approach her and ask for accommodations ahead of time, so it could be easier for her to prepare in advance".

Teachers' Experiences

Many of the teachers share their experiences vis-à-vis students with special needs.

A teacher from the early childhood education program said that when the student comes and asks for accommodations to be made in the very last minute, from her perspective this is a situation more indicative of a lack of trust.

Another pedagogical instructor from the early childhood education track reveals that she herself has a diagnosis of learning disabilities. She talked about her challenges, how for many years she was embarrassed to write on the board. She promised the students who participated in the discussion that self-confidence improves over time. "They have put into our head the thought that if we make an effort, we will succeed. This isn't always true".

She added about the importance of "thinking outside the box": "After we get out of the box and we do things differently, things work." Furthermore, according to her: "There's a difference between accommodation and relief – many times I feel like my anxieties take over my abilities" she summarizes.

A male pedagogical instructor in the early childhood education track: "Many students ask me for accommodations, especially when submitting their assignments. I wonder 'why should I treat you differently from all the others?'"

A teacher from the Department of Hebrew Language: "I have no idea how to deal with your daily needs and requests. It exhausts me! I have 30 other students in the class".

Teachers' Reference to the System-Wide Level

The teachers raise some dilemmas with regard to the college-wide system level.

The head of the early childhood education program for the Arabic-speaking population requests to go through a course on how to deal with students with disabilities.

A pedagogical instructor from the early childhood education track wishes to clarify: "Early on you don't always understand or know the student's background. When the student comes and asks for accommodations without first explaining the background, it makes decision-making much more difficult". She further adds that being provided with this information in the beginning of the first year would have been very helpful.

Another teacher from the early childhood education track says some interesting things: "What ties me up is the 'academic setting'. If I were 'free' I would've given them a completely different type of support. Academic conservatism really restricts me".

Head of the Academic Department: "I'm not sure that a student with disabilities could be a teacher in the future".

Summary and Recommendations

Today higher education is recognized as a natural stage in the individual's life cycle and as an integral part thereof. It is a means for learning a profession and assists in the process of self-determination and the creation of a positive self-image. Sometimes, individuals with special needs have difficulty acquiring the academic, economic and social benefits of higher education for themselves. Coping with disability can create a sense of academic underachievement in them and consequently bind them to less prestigious positions or to unemployment. A supported academic education program was created in order to increase the accessibility of institutions for higher learning for individuals with disabilities and to increase the chances of their equal integration in the job market.

However, despite the recognition of the hardships experienced by students with disabilities and the moral and legal obligation to provide them with accommodations, the situation on the scene is unsatisfactory. Furthermore, sometimes academic staff members are reluctant to recognize the students' needs and to make the necessary accommodations (Kendall and Tarman, 2016). The current series of meetings provided support to this claim. One teacher has expressed her frustration in having to deal with a student with special needs while there are 30 other students in her class.

As the staff of the support center in the Academic College of Education, it was important to us to build the above-mentioned model of support, in order to expand our perspective and to assess the benefits and challenges of the proposed model, with a view to **leading a change among education students with special needs and their teachers, through an authentic and open discussion of unique difficulties in academia.**

Consistently with Burgstahler's (2005) findings, the academic success of students with learning disabilities and other special needs in higher education does not depend entirely on their efforts, on the physical accessibility of support centers on campus and the availability of support services, but also, to a large extent, on the knowledge that the teaching staff have on the subject of students with special needs, on their attitudes towards this student population and mostly in their willingness to make accommodations to their teaching and evaluation methods in their classrooms, laboratories and field practice sessions (Burgstahler, 2005). In one of the model's meetings, one of the teaching staff's representatives emphasized the importance of thinking outside the box as a solution to the difficulties raised. Additionally, the students also mentioned some tools that can help them such as a learning strategies course, along with the expectation that the teacher will look at the struggling student with a caring and human perspective.

In the series of meetings so far, it is possible to say that the discourse between the students and the academic staff was authentic, powerful and in certain cases also very emotional. Following these meetings, it seems that the teachers, at least some of them, are more attentive to their students and better informed about their hardships and struggles. We feel that these are first steps on the journey to promote an organizational culture of containment and awareness of students' special needs.

Despite its successes, the current model had some disadvantages:

Lipka et al. (2019) claim that while the general attitude in Israel towards students with special needs is positive, many times the teaching staff lacks knowledge and strategies to deal with this population. In the meetings, the teaching staff's need for specific strategies and teaching methods to better deal with the difficulties of students with special needs was evident. Thus, for example, the head of the early childhood education track for the Arabic speaking population requested to be given the opportunity "to take a course on how to deal with students with disabilities".

In the focus group we noticed some challenging things that need to be emphasized. Thus, for example, due to the need for exposure vis-à-vis the academic staff, few students have expressed their willingness to participate in the meetings. In total, about 15 students participated in all of the meetings. Participation from the teaching staff's part was also unsatisfactory.

Following the series of meetings, it seems that despite the existing knowledge, the execution of the accommodations to the teaching methods is more often than not unsatisfactory.

Despite the model's relatively small scale, its results were very interesting. Insights and comments can be divided between those that were brought up by the students and by the staff. Generally speaking, it is possible to say that the

atmosphere was very respectful and open. The discourse that was created was very authentic. Sometimes some very uneasy claims were made. However, at the end of the meeting there was a feeling that the parties have reached significant mutual insights. The meeting allowed for more in-depth acquaintance between teachers and students and brought about surprising and emotional revelations and reflection on the teaching staff's part.

Following the series of meetings that is expected to continue, we, together with the students and the staff, have reached several conclusions that will lead to an intervention plan. A need arose to provide teachers with practical strategies on how to implement student accommodations. Furthermore, voices were heard regarding the participation of representatives of students from the support center in the forums of the academic teaching staff. A need was raised to provide teachers with an illustration of the experiences of struggling students. Furthermore, academic staff members have stated the importance of providing them with a platform to raise and process their feelings and attitudes with regard to teaching students with special needs. Additionally, a system-wide need was raised for consolidating an organizational culture that encourages the integration of students with special needs in the spirit of the Law on the Rights of Students with Learning Disabilities at Post-Secondary School Institutions, 5768-2008 (El-Dor, 2014). There' a need to provide clear guidelines for the options of alternative evaluation and personally customized teaching methods for students with special needs, similar to Talmor and Kayam's (2006) findings and Greenberger and Leyser's (2008) recommendations that early on in the student's academic path, an authentic, in-depth and respectful discourse should be encouraged between the teaching staff and the struggling students, just as one of the teachers said in the discussion: "Early on you don't always understand or know the student's background. When the student comes and asks for accommodations without first explaining the background, it makes decision-making much more difficult".

In light of the findings described by Talmor and Kayam (2006), Greenberg and Leyser (2008) also suggest as a direction for future study the joint survey and study between the support center's staff and the academic staff, with the support of the college's administrators, in order to raise awareness to the attitudes of the teaching staff and to teaching methods designed to assist students with a variety of special needs.

We hope that successes among the focus groups will bring about greater participation from academic and administrative staff members and of course from our students who would like to share, to demonstrate their experiences and to self-advocate.

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