

Principals' Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Special Education Students in Regular Schools: Associations with Self-Efficacy, Satisfaction, and Stress at Work

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perspectives of elementary and middle school principals in Israel regarding the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms. The research followed a mixed methods approach, which offers various benefits for a more comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. The sample included 143 elementary and middle school principals who completed questionnaires on their self-efficacy, job satisfaction, stress, and attitudes toward inclusion. In order to deepen our understanding of the quantitative findings, qualitative data was collected from 11 semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed no differences between elementary school and middle school principals in terms of their attitudes toward inclusion, and there were no correlations between principals' sense of self-efficacy and their attitudes toward inclusion. Principals who expressed high satisfaction with their work had fewer negative attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special needs. The research findings suggest that principals play a critical role in providing support and fostering trust among students with special needs. Principals serve as a valuable resource for these students, aiding in the development of an inclusive social environment.

Keywords

School Principals, Attitudes toward Inclusion, Special Education, Self-Efficacy, Job Satisfaction, Stress

1. Introduction

School principals take on numerous roles. Their duties include organizational development, decision-making, management, systematic and systemic planning, ensuring a safe environment, curating, and enforcing the curriculum, planning the school budget, developing the school vision, teacher recruitment, etc. (The Ministry of Education, 2023). There are few studies on the inclusion of special needs students in regular classes from the point of view of principals. To fill this gap, this study examined the attitudes of elementary and middle school principals toward inclusion, as they related to their sense of self-efficacy, stress, and satisfaction with their work.

1.1. Theoretical Background

1.1.1. Special Education

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift globally in how society views individuals with disabilities. The society has transitioned from a condescending approach to one that emphasizes human dignity and recognizes their rights as citizens.

Special education refers to individualized instruction tailored to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities (Bishara, 2015; Block et al., 2019). This type of education aims to ensure students receive the necessary support and services to achieve academic success and enhance essential life skills (Bishara, 2015).

Special education encompasses a wide range of services and support for students with diverse disabilities or special needs, such as intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, speech or language impairments, autism spectrum disorders, and various other health impairments (Bishara, 2015; Reiter & Neuman, 2020).

In addition to academic instruction, special education may also include treatments such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy to address specific needs. The ultimate goal of special education is to help students with disabilities realize their full potential, achieve independence and successfully navigate the challenges they face in and out of school (Bishara, 2015). In the past, students with special needs were excluded from mainstream schools (Block et al., 2019; Peterson, 2017).

This global trend toward inclusivity (Loreman et al., 2014) is expanding options for integration and promoting a more inclusive educational environment for all students.

1.1.2. Roles of Elementary and Middle School Principals

Optimal leadership is essential to student and school success. Principals have a major responsibility in ensuring academic excellence and in recent years, their role has become more complex (Reid, 2021). The role of a school principal is to guide the teaching staff in its educational and pedagogical endeavors. Schools

play a prominent part in the community as a focal point for the variety of needs of their students and parents. As a result, the stress experienced by principals can be immense (Darmody & Smyth, 2016).

Research conducted by Beusaert et al. (2016) highlighted that alterations in the responsibilities of principals and their diminished autonomy have the potential to create stress. It has been observed that middle school principals may encounter distinct challenges compared to elementary school teachers.

1.1.3. Inclusion of Special Education Students

Many studies have described the organizational problems, teacher absences, budget cuts, intra-positional conflicts, as well as behavioral problems that school administrators often face (Oplatka, 2015; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010; Surkis Adin, 2018). Shilshtein and Margalit (2019) suggested that the way a school is run has a major impact on the inclusion process and school success. Principals are called upon to adapt to changing attitudes toward diversity, develop strategies for inclusion, and strengthen school-community relations. Principals must face a dynamic reality that accommodates their role ambiguity in their relationships between teachers and the administrative staff. Principals deal daily with interpersonal relationships, economic issues and the promotion of the school culture to which they are committed (Sharon, 2010). Principals need to set organizational goals, make sure that the staff operates efficiently, and constantly engage in human relations management (Raichel & Kastelman, 2018).

School administrators must adhere to the school culture, which encompasses the totality of the internal relations in the school. This includes the relationships between teachers and students and the relationships between the principal and the teachers. Lynch (2016) suggested that in order for principals to be effective in implementing the inclusion process, they must be familiar with special education methods for students included in regular education classrooms.

Few studies have examined the pressures on principals involved in dealing with the presence of students with special needs in their school, or how they deal with these situations (Shilshtein & Margalit, 2019). Hess (2009) examined principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with visual impairments and found an association between these principals' support for inclusion and their teachers' willingness to cooperate with other staff members. Timor (2004) noted that principals who responded positively to inclusion tended to take on leadership roles to ensure the success of the team's vision. This may be a function of self-efficacy and stress management, as discussed in the next section.

1.1.4. Self-Efficacy and Stress in School Staff

Self-efficacy is defined as individuals' perception of their ability to successfully engage in behaviors that will lead them to their goals. Self-efficacy has a significant impact on all areas of life. Thus, principals with low self-efficacy may be more likely to have problems completing tasks and may have a greater tendency to ma-

nifest depression and experience stress (Friedman, 2003). Bandura (1977, 1997) described *self-efficacy* as the perception of a person's ability with respect to a particular task or behavior, and argued that self-efficacy influences emotional responses and behaviors, in particular when it comes to stress. Aran and Zartsky (2017) examined teachers' sense of self-efficacy, which they characterized as their ability to fulfill their teaching tasks, influence important decisions in the school, and maintain their status in the eyes of their students.

Managing a school often involves handling various managerial and organizational challenges due to limited resources, budget constraints, staffing reductions, and complexities stemming from educational and social issues (Ben Dor, 2017). Several studies have described the pressure faced by school administrators. Mahfouz and Gordon (2021) reported that school principals must work under job demands that generate considerable stress. She found that this stress affects their well-being and job performance. Shilshtein and Margalit (2019) argued that teachers' and school staff's sense of efficacy with respect to the integration of students with special needs is influenced by support from the school principal. There is ample literature on teachers' ability to cope with stress (Emmers et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020; Yada et al., 2022). However, few studies examined the principals and the implications of inclusion at different levels.

1.1.5. School Principals' Satisfaction with Their Work

There is no one empirical definition of satisfaction. Mincu (2015) defined this construct as "a positive frame of mind that is reflected by the employee's opinion regarding work or the climate of his workplace". Employee satisfaction is generally assessed in terms of internal satisfaction and external satisfaction. Internal satisfaction is defined as the effort individuals invest, personal achievements, involvement, mastery of work methods, responsibility, and challenges. External satisfaction refers to external forms of acknowledgement such as recognition, feedback, promotion, raises, and rewards.

In recent years, several studies have identified changes that can influence principals' work including school policy, pedagogy social and demographic trends, parental expectations, and budget cuts (Alsaeedi & Male, 2013; Cardno & Youngs, 2013). All of these changes can place increasing demands on principals and lead to an increase in their responsibilities. This makes their work more complex (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) and at times can generate stress (Wang et al., 2018).

Today, personal fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment are valued in the workplace as they reflect dedication and drive, and self-satisfaction is considered important on the job since it demonstrates commitment (Wang et al., 2018). Wang et al. (2018) found that job satisfaction at work is a crucial driver of principals' positive attitudes toward their work. Their findings suggested that greater responsibility also entails more pressure, which may negatively impact job satisfaction and prompt principals to seek other types of work.

1.1.6. The Current Study

The current study examined elementary school and middle school principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms. It explored the associations between their sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction and stress when dealing with the inclusion of special education students in regular classes. Specifically, it addressed three questions:

- 1) What are the attitudes of school principals toward the inclusion of students with special needs in their school?
- 2) Is there a difference between elementary school principals and middle school principals toward inclusion in terms of self-efficacy, satisfaction, and stress?
- 3) Which variables (self-efficacy, satisfaction, and stress) most affect elementary school and middle school principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of special education students in their schools?

2. Measures

In this research, it was used two research methods: a quantitative method where data were gathered using questionnaires, and a qualitative method, where data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires. As in Tzabar Ben Yehoshua (1990), a combination of these two methods completed and validated the data.

2.1. Quantitative Instruments

2.1.1. Demographic Questionnaire

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

2.1.2. General Self-Efficacy—Chen, Gully, and Eden (2001)

This questionnaire is composed of 14 items and examines beliefs with respect to abilities and goal achievement. Sample items include “I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself”, and “In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me”. 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 0.97. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.97.

2.1.3. Job Satisfaction and Commitment Questionnaire—Rusbult and Farrel (1983)

This questionnaire is composed of 23 sentences divided into six key areas: bonuses from work; for example: “To what extent are positive things related to your work?”; costs deriving from work, for example: “To what extent, in general, are unpleasant things related to your work?”; investment at work, for example: “In general, to what extent will you break away from the people you are connected to through work if you leave it?”; job alternatives, for example: “How good are your options for working in another job”, degree of satisfaction, for example: “In general, how much do you like your job?”; and commitment to

work, for example: “What are the chances that you will leave your job soon?”. Responses are made on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

In the original study, 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 were $\alpha = 0.60 - 0.77$, commitment to work was $\alpha = 0.88 - 0.93$, and degree of satisfaction from work was $\alpha = 0.93 - 0.95$. In the current study, the overall Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = 0.92$.

2.1.4. PSS—Perceived Stress Scale—Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983)

This 14-item questionnaire assesses individuals’ distress levels on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often). Eight items refer to feelings of stress; for example: “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and ‘stressed’?” Six items measure coping with the feeling of stress. For example: “How often, do you feel that you took good care of things that bother you?” The total score is the mean of the scores on each item, such that a high score indicates a high level of distress. The original Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = 0.84 - 0.86$. 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.

2.1.5. ORM—Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming—Leyser and Kirk (2004)

This questionnaire was modified for school principals. The scale is composed of 14 items ranked on a Likert scale from 1 (disagree) to 5 (very much agree). The items are divided into positive items and negative items referring to attitudes that are favorable or unfavorable to inclusion, respectively. One example of a favorable item reads: “Inclusion will give the integrated child better control over understanding new concepts”. One example of an unfavorable item reads “The combination may impair the emotional development of students with disabilities”. The Cronbach’s alpha in the current study for the negative items was $\alpha = 0.75$, and for the positive items was $\alpha = 0.9$.

2.2. Qualitative Research

Semi-Structured Interviews with School Principals

In addition to the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 principals. The aim was to learn more about the attitudes of these principals concerning the integration of students with special needs in their schools.

A series of predetermined questions was prepared but could be modified as a function of the responses throughout the interview. The questions touched on the principals’ background, as well as personal, social and systemic issues. For example, the questions included: “How do you see the inclusion of students from a study point of view?”, “Do you experience objections or difficulties from the teaching staff? From parents? Students (both the included students and the other students in the class)?”, “What other challenges do you face in the context

of the school inclusion process (budget, school climate, the quality of learning and teaching, etc.?).” All the interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the principals. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Subsequently, the responses were analyzed with Narralyzer Software (Shkedi, 2014). This software program digitizes high-quality data for researchers. The data analysis with this software takes place in several steps.

1) The interview transcripts are read in detail. The purpose of this stage is to identify different patterns and segments within the data to obtain a complete picture of data before separating them into analysis units.

2) The thematic units identified in stage 1 are classified into categories.

3) A “category tree” of themes is generated.

4) A table listing the findings in terms of prevalence and subcategories is generated.

5) The results are derived from the table.

3. Procedure

Following the approval of the Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education, the researchers obtained a list of inclusive schools, all over the country mainly elementary, where students with disabilities were integrated into the regular classes with their peers. The first step was to contact the school principals to obtain their consent for the participation. A letter detailing the aim of the study coupled with the aforementioned approval was mailed to the schools. Then, recruitment implemented the snowball method. In “snowball” sampling, the interviewee gives the interviewer name of another interviewee and so on. The questionnaires were administered online. All participants signed a written consent form. The participants filled out the questionnaires anonymously via a link sent by e-mail, SMS, or through social networks. The participants were informed that the data would be used for research purposes alone. The interviews were conducted with 11 principals (four men and seven women). Seven were middle school principals and four were elementary school principals. They ranged in age from 36 to 68, and their seniority ranged from one year as principal to 32 years as principal.

The interviews were semi-structured, in that the interviewees were interviewed using a series of predefined questions, in a known but flexible order, according to the interviewee and how the conversation evolved. The interview guide consisted of five leading open questions, which let the interviewees provide comprehensive answers that explained and told their stories from their subjective point of view (Shkedi, 2003). The verbatim recordings were then synthesized into information units constituting ideas and insights that captured the interviewees’ experiences (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 1990). Since the interviews took the form of a type of dialogue between the researcher and the participants, they not only collected information but also created a type of structured reality. The interviews also shed light on personal stories of events and experiences the prin-

cipals had gone through as part of their daily reality.

Ethics

This research received ethical approval Israeli Ministry of Education. The study has been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants agreed to take part in the intervention program. All responses were anonymous. The school's principals who took part in the questionnaires and/or interviews were contacted via snowball sampling.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 143 school principals (male and female) who integrate special education students into mainstream classes in their schools. They ranged in age from 37 to 62, with seniorities of one to 31 years (Mean = 8.1; SD = 5.63). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 11 principals. **Table 1** presents the demographic data. Questionnaires were sent to different schools based on a list generated by an internet database with an explanation and a request to participate. All questionnaires were anonymous.

For the continuous variables, means and standard deviations were calculated. For the categorical variables, frequencies and percentages were calculated. An independent samples t-test was used to analyze the mean differences in continuous variables between groups. The categorical variables were compared between groups using Pearson's Chi-square or Fisher's exact tests.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: elementary school vs. middle school principals.

		Elementary school (N = 110)	Middle school (N = 32)	<i>p</i> -value
Gender, n (%)	Male	30 (27%)	8 (25%)	.80 ^a
	Female	80 (73%)	24 (75%)	
Education, n (%)	BA	7 (6%)	0	.49 ^b
	MA	100 (91%)	(97%) 31	
	Ph.D.	3 (3%)	1 (3%)	
Experience, n (%)	Without experience in special education	44 (40%)	10 (31%)	.35 ^a
	With experience in special education	65 (60%)	22 (69%)	
Seniority, mean ± sd		7.73 ± 5.63	9.38 ± 5.56	.15 ^c

Note: ^aPearson Chi-square test; ^bFisher's Exact test; ^ct-test. Totals differ since one principal did not indicate gender. Two principals did not indicate their field of specialization (special education or other). There were no statistically significant differences between groups (elementary school/middle school principals) in terms of gender, education, experience, and seniority.

4.2. Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis implemented SPSS software to calculate the dis-

tributions, means and standard deviations of the variables. To examine the relationships between the variables, Pearson correlations were calculated. To test for differences between groups, a t-test for independent samples was employed. Naralyzer software was used to analyze the interview data. Software (Shkedi, 2014) that identifies themes and subthemes was employed.

5. Results

5.1. Quantitative Findings

The sample was composed of 143 elementary and middle school principals serving student populations aged 6 to 14. The responses to the questionnaires were examined for differences between elementary and middle school principals with respect to their attitudes and perceptions toward the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms. The relationships between inclusion attitudes, self-efficacy satisfaction, and stress at work were also explored. To examine these questions, SPSS24 software was used. Pearson correlation tests were used to examine the relationship between the variables. A t-test was used to examine the differences between the two groups of principals (elementary vs. middle schools). To examine the principals' attitudes toward inclusion, the ORM inclusion questionnaire was divided into two groups of items indicating positive or negative attitudes toward inclusion. The mean score was calculated for each. The results indicated a negative correlation between the scores for the positive and negative aspects of inclusion, $r(142) = -0.54$. In other words, principals who agreed more with the positive items on inclusion also agreed less with items reflecting the negative aspects of inclusion.

Next, a t-test was used to explore differences in attitudes between elementary principals and middle school principals (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Differences between attitudes in favor of inclusion in elementary school vs. middle school principals.

Attitudes toward inclusion	School type	N	Mean score for inclusion attitudes	SD	T-test ^b	<i>p</i> -value
For inclusion	Elementary	110	3.75	.81	$t(140) = 1.45$.15
	Middle	32	3.52	.69		
	Total	142	3.70	.79		
Against inclusion	Elementary	110	2.73	.73	$t(140) = -.46$.65
	Middle	32	2.80	.67		
	Total	142	2.74	.72		
For/against inclusion comparison ^a					$t(141) = 8.61$	<.001

Note: ^aPaired samples t-test; ^bIndependent samples t-test.

As shown in **Table 2**, there were no significant differences between elementary school principals ($n = 110$) and middle school principals ($n = 32$) in their mean attitude in favor of inclusion and their mean attitude opposed to inclusion.

Paired samples t-tests indicated a significant difference between the principals' mean attitude in favor of inclusion ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .79$) and mean principals' attitudes against inclusion ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .72$), $t(141) = 8.61$, $p < .001$.

To test for correlations in the responses to the General Self-Efficacy, Job Satisfaction and PSS questionnaires and the inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms, a Pearson test was applied (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Correlations between principals' sense of self-efficacy, sense of job satisfaction, stress, and attitude toward inclusion.

		α	2	3	4	5	6
1	For inclusion	.89	-.54**	.04	.16	-.04	.05
2	Against-inclusion	.75		.02	-.30**	.18*	-.16
3	Self-efficacy	.96			.12	-.09	.11
4	Satisfaction	.89				-.29**	.22**
5	Stress	.76					-.30**
6	Stress coping	.82					

Note: **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows a significant negative correlation between satisfaction and attitude toward inclusion, indicating that principals reporting high job satisfaction had fewer negative perceptions of inclusion. With increasing levels of stress, principals were less satisfied with their work. There was a direct relationship between greater job satisfaction and the ability to cope with stress. There was no correlation between the principals' reported self-efficacy and the inclusion of students with special needs.

These same associations were then tested for the groups of principals separately, by dividing the sample into elementary school principals ($n = 110$) and middle school principals ($n = 32$); similar correlations were found.

5.2. Qualitative Analysis

5.2.1. Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from the 11 interview protocols was analysed using thematic analysis techniques based on the recommended coding process outlined by Shkedi (2014). This involved organizing the data, identifying categories, themes, and patterns, and seeking potential explanations. Significant themes, recurring expressions, and words were documented. Codes were adjusted or combined as needed and then organized into pattern codes. The themes and quotes were translated from Hebrew to English and verified by a translation service. The data categorization process was repeated multiple times for accuracy. To ensure credibility and reliability, the researchers individually analyzed the data and met regularly to discuss findings. Any discrepancies were resolved through comparisons and discussions.

Table 4 presents the five themes identified in the qualitative analysis: 1) How the principal saw the included students (academic integration, social integration),

2) The principal's involvement, 3) Difficulties dealing with the staff, 4) Difficulties dealing with parents, 5) Budgetary problems.

There are benefits to utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in research. Firstly, a qualitative approach aids in determining the primary criteria for conducting the study. Through the qualitative analysis of interviews, a wide array of emotions, attributes, and impressions expressed by interviewees were identified and utilized in defining thematic categories.

Table 4. Examples of themes—qualitative analysis.

Theme		Number of occurrences	Example
How the principal saw the included student	Academic integration	11	Some do exceptionally well. Others don't find it easy. I always say, to succeed you need a motivated school staff, students and parents who collaborate. A school that cooperates.
	Social integration	8	The students at the school were given a very important "gift": a "different" student in the class, it's not just a slogan, there's no way they're being laughed at or anything, but they also must mediate. It's hard for students to understand what autism is, in first grade, you can't explain.
Principal's involvement		10	I am involved, I come in, listen to the teachers, talk to the teachers, I'm aware of everything that's going on. I make calls...
Difficulties	Difficulties dealing with the staff	7	I tell the teachers that all students of all colors of the rainbow come here, and it is true that one or two of them is enough for each classroom.
	Difficulties dealing with parents	7	I'm not going to lie and say there are no difficulties with parents... If there's a child with difficulties in class, other parents say "why should we suffer?" And they grumble, but it's only a few.
	Budgetary problems	7	There is a problem with the education system. The classes are large and more resources are needed for treatment rooms, remedial teaching, the hours allotted are never enough.
Coping with difficulties		9	With sensitivity and determination. It's like that. Containing and listening but setting boundaries where necessary.

5.2.2. Academic Integration

The principals aimed to adapt integration to individual students. A. (male, 46) described situations in which the staff worked to identify the strengths of these students. "It is true that for the most part, the integrated students are less educationally strong. We try to reinforce them through very intense teaching..."

E. (female, 57) described the need for full cooperation between students, parents, and staff for inclusion to succeed.

I teach visually impaired children and we ask the parents to bring a magnifying glass. Some parents, however, do not. I explain to them that it's not going to work that way. You need to help the student for inclusion to work.

T. (female, 51) described a situation where inclusion took place more to satisfy the parents than the student. Parents need a diagnosis to understand that inclusion is not the right setting.

I teach a child diagnosed as fragile X. I'm not sure it's the right place for him. Parents also need to understand what their child is capable of and what is best for each. He's in a regular class, but his inclusion is for appearances only.

Some principals reported making creative efforts to reschedule hours. Some eliminated special education classes and instead sent these students out of class to a learning center. N. (female, 69) stated: "These students have become an integral part of the class, but if the student needs extra help, she leaves, not for just two hours, but for more".

5.2.3. Social Integration

Most of the principals mentioned social problems. This was attributed in part to the fact that each integrated student had a teaching assistant in class, which further emphasized the difference between them and other students. The principals stated that the staff made efforts to minimize this difference.

O. (male, 51) stated:

Socially there is a problem. Not because of the stigma... it's because he has a teaching assistant. They try to be like everyone, there are some objective difficulties. It keeps students away, but our experience is to protect everyone... Everything depends on the assistants, the educational staff, and the parents. There are times when there's regression, or delay in the process because there's something about the parent-staff-student triangle that is not working.

5.2.4. Principals' Involvement in the Inclusion Process

The principals differed in the amount of time they could devote to inclusion. E. (female, 57) said that she is involved all the time. "I make the rounds all the time. I go into the classes, I help the students, it's not easy for the teachers. 33 students is not easy".

S. (female, 46) said that she was not involved every day. "On a daily basis I am not involved because it is impossible, during staff meetings I start with these students. I go into classes during my rotation, I always ask about these students first...".

5.2.5. Difficulties with Teachers

The principals also described difficulties with the staff. Most teachers are trained for regular education and do not know how to deal with special education students. A. (male, 46) reported that some teachers are opposed to inclusion because the staff is untrained, and the decision about inclusion is made by the parents.

There is opposition among teachers because these students often make a mess, disrupt the class, or can be abusive. We once had to integrate an autistic child, but he didn't fit in. We asked the parents to place him elsewhere, but they refused.

D. (female, 47) expressed a similar sentiment. To make it easier for teachers, she divided the students into several classes:

The teachers... It's the teachers' decision. We split them into four classes to make it easier for the teachers. In seventh grade, there are 9 students, some with an assistant and it is a burden on the educators, it is not easy to deal with parents' demands.

S. (female, 46) described a situation in which all the teachers in her school found it difficult to accept these students.

There are objections... A significant part of the staff does not accept these students, smile at them or show them humanity and support educationally. It is very difficult for them to deal with these students, it requires preparation and adjustments, with sharing, and then they claim that we are under pressure and that the other students are being held back. I have to spend time reviewing with one child and there are 30 other students in the class.

A. (female, 48) felt that she could not satisfy everyone:

Sometimes I hear everyone complaining... I tell the teachers that all the students of all colors of the rainbow come here, but it is true that sometimes we feel that one or two of them in the classroom is enough.

5.2.6. Difficulties with Families

The principals described difficulties affecting the integrated students and the regular students in these classes. E. (female, 57) said that a few families oppose inclusion: “A few of parents say ‘why should we suffer? And they grumble, but it's only a few’”.

T. (female, 51) also shared the feeling that parental demands can be a burden “The mother intervenes, it is a burden but there is improvement in the attitude... Parents exhaust the educators”. She added:

A lot of times parents intervene because of their lack of understanding and professionalism because this is their child. They do a disservice to the students when they decide for them. The problem is the change in the law that gives parents the power to decide where to send their children to school.

O. (male, 51) mentioned parental support. “Whether the parents are with us or not with us. A special education kid—you need to establish trust with the parents—it's very complicated”. A. (male, 46) claimed that “parents now have too much power. Today parents are totally in control of the process. I think they went too far. The school doesn't have enough power”.

5.2.7. Systemic—Budgetary Difficulties

In terms of systemic difficulties, the principals were unanimous that there is a vital need for more resources devolved for example to treatment for the students, and special training for the teaching assistants. E. (female, 57) noted that:

There are not always the right conditions for treatment, I would love to have more rooms for example... There are not always enough personnel for treatment. There was no occupational therapy this year for my included students. And I

needed it.

According to O. (male, 41), “*The teaching assistants earn the minimum wage and are not qualified to work with the students... and that’s a challenge*”. O. (male, 51) described a situation in which the reform was carried out for budgetary and not for ethical reasons:

They didn’t engage in inclusion for its value but just to cut costs. And then there’s a lot of money involved. The success of the inclusion is not just about the teachers and the values issue—it would be about values if all the money that was directed to special education was directed to a regular school. This is where the kid only gets like 60% of that money.

D. (female, 47) also described the lack of financial support:

...I think if they really wanted the inclusion to work, they should have set aside a sufficient number of hours. When these students only come for a few hours, it saves a lot of hours for the Ministry of Education. It would have been better to leave them as a small class and let them fit in for a few hours.

5.2.8. Dealing with the Difficulties

The principals were asked how they coped with these difficulties. Their answers were varied and ranged from the physical setting of the classroom to the personnel and resources. The principals discussed trying to be creative and looking for solutions to support the included students. This involved smaller classrooms so that the teacher could deal with all the students, increasing the budget, as well as training suitable teachers and staff. As D. (female, 47) noted: “*First of all they need to reduce the classroom size, this program cannot succeed with 35 students, there needs to be an extra budget for more hours, and staff training: the staff should have been trained before starting the reform*”.

S. (female, 46) also claimed that it would be easier for staff if they had appropriate training: “*First of all, professional development in terms of containment... We held a meeting of the whole team...there are special education instructors who come every month...*”.

6. Discussion

This study compared the attitudes of elementary school and middle school principals toward the inclusion of special education students in regular classes. It also examined the potential contribution of self-efficacy, satisfaction, and feelings of stress to these differences. There is extensive literature on inclusion in different platforms. However, few studies have addressed the relationship between principals’ attitudes toward inclusion with respect to their sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction, and feelings of stress.

The quantitative findings indicated that the attitudes of both elementary school and middle school principals were similar and positive toward inclusion. In the current sample, 62% had a background in special education, which is comparable to the percentage in previous studies (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016; Smith, 2011). Research suggests that inclusion is more successful when principals are

more knowledgeable (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Alabri, 2017; King, 2011).

The qualitative findings supported the quantitative findings: in the interviews, the principals who had a background in special education saw inclusion much more positively. Although self-efficacy is a major source of strength when facing challenges, there was no correlation in the current study between level of self-efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion. By contrast, Zabidat, Dallasha, and Bashir (2019) reported that teachers who rated themselves as low on self-efficacy saw the inclusion of special education students as a source of disruption and tended to pay more attention to stronger students. However, their findings related to teachers rather than to principals. Although teacher self-efficacy was not assessed here, it is possible that the teachers would have had similar attitudes in the classroom since most had no background in special education, unlike the principals. Principals play an important role in the inclusion process and its success, which may lead to stress. The findings here indicated that greater stress impacted job satisfaction and that the level of stress was linked to more negative attitudes toward inclusion.

The principals noted that the major difficulties they encountered were dealing with parents and the teaching staff's lack of training in special education. Comparable to a study by Naon, Milshtein, and Marom (2011), the principals here considered that the social adaptation of special needs students depended on the type of disability. Students with sensory impairments tend to be accepted better than students with cognitive impairments such as students with Down syndrome, and students on the autism spectrum.

The principals believed that the success of academic integration depended on the students' abilities. They also considered that social integration was more difficult due to the way special education students are singled out in the classroom by having teaching assistants with them.

Avissar, Reiter, and Leyser (2003) argued that school principals feel that students with special education needs can be better integrated socially than educationally, albeit as a function of the nature of the disability. The findings here suggest that principals did not differentiate between academic integration and social integration. This may be because the principals are rarely in the classroom, do not interact with these students every day, and thus fail to perceive their academic and social difficulties. Some principals indicated that they delegated responsibility and allowed teachers to oversee these classes. Alabri (2017) also found that principals' attitudes toward inclusion tended to be positive when they were in close contact with class educators.

There is no doubt that school principals play an important and significant role in the inclusion of students with special needs in their school, in terms of transferring knowledge and information about these students, creating an inclusive climate for the success of inclusion, delegating powers to the classroom teachers and supervising on a regular basis.

The principal creates an environment of open communication with his teachers, as noted by Rozek and Stobäus (2017) in their article highlighting the signi-

ficance of dialogue in pedagogy. Effective communication is essential for all parties involved. The expertise of school principals, their years of accumulated knowledge, willingness to entrust teachers with students' well-being and instruction, satisfaction with school staff, self-efficacy as educational leaders, and the pressures they face all play a significant role in their ability to fulfill their responsibilities and view inclusion as a fundamental aspect of the education mission.

7. Conclusion

The principal has an important and significant role in the success of a school, in the success of every field, and in every project undertaken within its framework, including the integration program for students with special needs into regular education. The principal's experience, expertise, vision and positive attitudes toward the topic of integration of special needs' students in mainstream education, as highlighted in our research, indicate the success of the entire inclusion framework.

It is important to note that having relevant knowledge and background in the field of special education, and the integration of students with special needs into mainstream education are essential foundations expected of every teacher who chooses to teach these students. Therefore, the principal should choose teachers who have expertise and knowledge in the field, who are ready and capable of effectively working with this student population, that is, teachers who can foster the students' self-efficacy, strengthen their self-confidence and allow them to realize their inherent potential.

In this situation, principals may experience a decrease in stress as they navigate interactions with staff and parents more smoothly. Additionally, successfully managing the integration program within the school and facilitating the optimal integration of students into society should be a key focus for principals, potentially leading to increased job satisfaction.

8. Limitations

The current study has a number of limitations. Gender influences could not be examined since there were many more female than male principals. There were different numbers of elementary school and middle school principals, thus making some results difficult to interpret. Another limitation relates to the timing of the study that was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic such that the response rate to the questionnaires was low.

9. Future Directions

The findings point to the need to further study principals in different sectors with varying years of experience. This would help better assess principals' needs and the difficulties they face. Future work should also examine why parents decide to place their special needs child in mainstream education. This may enable institutions to provide better guidance to parents in making the best choice for

their children. It would be worthwhile to design a special training course for principals who have students with special needs in their schools. This type of course could allow the principals to vent, while working toward positive changes in self-efficacy, satisfaction, and feelings of stress at work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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