THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON THE WORLD OF THE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT

Dana Barak Harel
South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (Bulgaria)

Abstract. This article focuses on the influence of the environment on the functioning of the students with learning disabilities, with reference to applied aspects related to the interaction of the individuals with their environment. The article presents the challenges with which learning disabled students cope in the education system and proposes ways of coping that will allow these students to feel that they are an inseparable part of the community to which they belong and to muster the motivation for the developmental tasks required of them.
Keywords: students with learning disabilities; environment

Learning Disability – The Challenge

Students with learning disability cope frequently with diverse learning challenges. However, their coping does not end with the learning tasks and its effects are seen outside of the classroom and the school. A rich research corpus has developed in the past decades and has focused on the identification of the social and emotional characteristics of students with learning disability and the awareness of their role that is important to the understanding of the functioning and investment of efforts of children and youths. A broad review of the research that engages in the fields of social information processing, social abilities, and emotional characteristics of children and youths with learning disability indicates additional difficulties such as loneliness – in other words social distress (Margalit 2012), self-efficacy – the belief that the person has the ability to perform roles (Bandura 2006), and hope – the integration of future perspectives in the identification of personal goals and the planning of paths (Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rang & Feldman 2003). The findings of the research studies emphasized that the feeling of loneliness of children and adolescents with learning disabilities does not only reflect social difficulties but also expresses the evaluation of the available psychological resources and reference to the social self-perception and feelings of distress (Margalit 2012). These findings shed light on the everyday distress of those who cope with a learning disability.

In a research study carried out in Israel (Barak Harel 2019) that sampled 64 students (with and without a learning disability) aged twelve to sixteen who study in different academic frameworks (special education class in the regular school/regular class) significant differences were not found between the research groups in variables of sense of efficacy, social anxiety, and sense of belonging. These findings inspired great interest because of the fact that they are not commensurate with most of the research literature on the topic. Some of the explanations pertain to the unique characteristics of the school in which they collected the data or in other words the learning environment. The learning environment that constitutes a platform for social and emotional learning (SEL) enables students to undergo balanced development between the academic learning and the emotional and social fields meaningful to the person's wellbeing and constitute a basis for all learning.

Social Emotional Learning – Why Is It Important?

It is possible to find in the research literature different theoretical frameworks that pertain to social learning, such as **system theories** that determine that the environment influences the children's behavior and adjustment to the school (Luhmann 2013); *learning theories* that explain that social relationships, including the personal example of significant figures such as teachers, have direct impact on the social climate in the classroom and in the school (Braungart & Braungart 2018); *child development theories* that present a viewpoint on the manner of occurrence of development (the ability to think, to feel a range of emotions, and to create social relationships), with its characteristics and the factors that shape the process of development (Shute & Slee 2015); *theory of social information processing*, which grew from the understanding that all information that is absorbed and processed is understood differently from the way in which others absorbed and understood it (Walther 1992); *theories of behavioral change*, which seek to explain why certain behaviors change and refer to personality, environmental, and behavioral characteristics as main factors of the change of behavior (Bandura 1977); and *social development theory* that maintains that children learn positive and negative behaviors from their environment. This theory describes how the children's involvement, their skills, their reinforcements, and the social relationships inside and outside of the school as well as the quality of their attachment, the commitment, and the beliefs that they develop influence their behavior (Crawford 1996).

Until recently the schools in Israel dedicated most of their resources to the development of the student's academic skills for the purpose of success in the high school matriculation examinations. This narrow reference ignores the students' social and emotional learning and thus emphasizes the students for whom the formal learning constitutes complicated task.

As of today, the prevalent approach is that the role of the education system is to develop students with balanced skills in the cognitive, social, and emotional fields, so that they will succeed in coping with the challenges of the 21st century. This broad viewpoint

contributes to the promotion of skills that will help them cope with technological challenges and a multicultural and socially complex society (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš & Drasgow 2018).

Self-Determination Theory and Social Emotional Learning – Applied Aspects

Social-emotional learning first and foremost leaves its mark on the class climate – on the percentages of dropping out of students from the school and the prevention of bullying and aggression of students (Berg, Osher, Moroney & Yoder 2017). In addition, the influence on the school climate supports the development of social emotional learning and intrinsic motivation through the involvement of the community in learning and in the leading of processes in the school (Schechtman & Yaman Abu, 2012).

According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2000), every person has three basic psychological needs. (1) Autonomy – the individual's need to feel that most of his actions express his desire and fields of interest and values. In essence, this is the need to feel control. (2) Need for feeling of efficacy – the need to feel that you are capable of realizing intentions and achieving products that are not easy to achieve. This is the ability to implement programs and goals. (3) Need for connection, belonging, and safety – this expresses the need for a feeling of belonging to an esteemed and desired group, the confidence in the interpersonal relationship and emotional closeness, and the feeling that the individual is not alone in his coping. The self-determination model (Deci & Ryan 2000) is a causal model according to which intrinsic motivation is a product of a causal chain, which includes two main components: (a) processes of the self – thoughts, beliefs, and emotions related to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and (b) factors in the environment that influence the degree to which the situation is perceived as providing the three needs. This article presents some of the unique practices of the schools that cultivate the learners' social-emotional learning alongside academic skills. Practices that pertain to the development of these three basic psychological needs in the educational framework are presented in the following sections.

Development of Sense of Efficacy

The person's belief in his ability is not automatic and does not grow on its own; it is a part of the interaction of the individual and the environment. The concept of self-efficacy was coined by Bandura (1995), who addresses the belief that the person has in his abilities to realize his intentions and to achieve products that will require effort. For the person to believe in his ability, he needs a supportive environment that will believe in him. These beliefs influence the person's behavior, choices, efforts, and ability to deal with his different life tasks. The feeling of efficacy addresses specific events in focused areas, and it is changeable by its very definition. A high feeling of efficacy produces expectations for success, and these generally provide good achievements (Bandura 1977). In contrast, a low feeling of efficacy creates an expectation for failure and following it lowered results (Bandura 1977; Bandura 1995; Usher & Pajares 2008).

Steps of action that build the sense of efficacy:

1. To build and cultivate a feeling of efficacy among students, we must enable challenging experiences, those that require true effort, in light of which it is possible to analyze achievements through the recognition of the nature of the role and the ability. According to the compensation hypothesis, students with learning disabilities will develop a positive and empowering self-perception through fields of intervention that are not necessarily academic, for instance, social emotional learning, sportive or physical activity, and this may lead to the increase of the perception of difficulty in the learning (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi 2017).

2. Emphasis on the process more than on the result.

3. Reference to the mistake as a part of the learning process and as a beneficial event for the purpose of the establishment of the learning.

4. Creation of frameworks and norms of group work that enable asking for help, giving constructive feedback, and assistance among students. In this context, the integration of learning disabled students in the regular class can constitute a springboard for high functioning and growth of motivation for learning and social integration. Hence, the great importance of the integration of learning disabled students in the regular classes is the declaration – the declaration of faith in the students' ability to integrate and learn and the declaration of the staff that is committed to the task with all that this implies.

Development of a Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging is the person's need to feel that he is a part of the group that he appreciates and respects and his desire to receive similar esteem on its part (Deci & Ryan 2000). This is the need to maintain close, secure, and satisfactory relationships with others in the social environment, out of a feeling of physical and psychological protection (Assor 2003). This feeling constitutes an essential condition for accepting agreements of a group, laws, and conventions and it is an essential condition for the acquisition of spoken and written language. A learning disability may harm the student's verbal and nonverbal communicational ability (Kavale & Forness 1996), and as a result of the harm to this ability, deficient social communication is created, which invites social difficulties (Margalit 1994) that may detrimentally influence the sense of belonging (Corrales et al. 2016). Hence, it must not be assumed that the sense of belonging is created by itself; it is necessary to act to create it.

Steps of action that build the sense of belonging*:*

1. Learning that is held in work groups that have rules of respect and appropriate social norms. The task is to build a group in which every individual is unique, and the emphasis of the individual's contribution to the group and the group's contribution to the individual creates a feeling of belonging.

2. Building programs with emphasis on broad ecology, namely, those that involve elements inside and outside of the class environment are more effective in comparison

to programs that include components from only the class environment (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger 2011).

3. Students reported that they feel belonging to the school and to their class when they contribute their part in ceremonies and different events of the school (Barak Harel 2019). In addition, the creation of roles suitable for the individual in the group, the creation of shared experiences, and the phrasing and emphasis of the meaning of the belonging create and strengthen the sense of efficacy.

Development of a Sense of Autonomy among Students

As aforementioned, this is the need of every person to feel independent, to express in his behavior his personal needs, his tendencies, and his values and to feel that this behavior is not forced on him but is directed by him. This is the feeling that best reflects the person's independent choice. When a person feels autonomy, he can not only choose his occupation but also initiate and decide how they will be performed. Sometimes the school is perceived as a space in which the students have little autonomy but there is no justification for this. If we understand the role and its necessity in the students' development, then we can enable a range of experiences that encourage autonomy in the school.

Steps of action that build a feeling of autonomy:

1. A teacher who knows the students' perspective (feelings, desires, opinion).

2. Giving the possibility and encouragement to initiative and choice in the learning process, ranging from the choice of learning tasks to the possibility of choice of the ways of assessment – how the student will express what he knows. In most cases, the students are required to express their knowledge in a written test. However, this is not the sole way to evaluate knowledge. Debate, inquiry work, and the creation of a model are all appropriate alternatives that can faithfully reflect the students' knowledge and enable a range of students to feel that they are at their best. Alongside these, it is possible to enable choice between enrichment courses and activities like committees and even in the sitting place. When the school is aware of the importance of autonomy in the students' lives, it allows the students to develop the feeling that they are directing themselves in space and thus they can develop a sense of responsibility.

3. The holding of a constant dialogue with the students on the meaning of the learning and the learning material in order to find the connection to the students. The relevance of the material to the students' lives is critical in this context.

4. The teacher who implements a rage of teaching methods and uses diverse ways of illustration enables each and every student to find the way that best suits him to learn.

Conclusion

This article offers a different look on the educational environment and its role in the design of the learning disabled student's world and functioning in the school. Since

students with learning disabilities deal with complex difficulties throughout all the hours of the day, the organization of the educational environment through reference to social-emotional learning may support their normal development. This topic is relevant since it has impact not only on the emotional wellbeing in the present but also on the person's success even after the school years. The way in which the student in the last years in the school perceives his abilities and possible successes in higher studies influences the choice of the program of studies and his ability to persevere in it. Openness to failures from time to time and the desire to cope with frustration and ambivalent tasks of learning are important to the success in the continuation studies and the work on them during the years of school improves the students' endurance and their willingness for similar coping in the future.

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✉ **Dana Barak Harel, PhD student**
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2214-8834
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"
Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
E-mail: danabarakharel@gmail.com