

**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

**Staff Members' Perceptions of "Learning from  
Success" in a Special Education School for Students  
with Severe Intellectual Disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

Because special education schools operate in turbulent and uncertain environments, staff members are particularly bound to benefit from organizational learning (OL). Surprisingly, a retroactive examination of events as opportunities for such learning indicates that the focus is usually placed on difficulties and failures – “problem-based learning” (PBL), while successful practices go ignored, unexamined, and unperceived as opportunities for learning. The focus on failures and problems creates negative discourse, which also deprives the team of meaningful learning.

The current research addresses a different OL approach, known as “learning from success.” This method concentrates on investigating successful actions, with the aim of exposing colleagues’ knowledge and practices that have recently been successful in the organization. This process of collaborative learning from successful events may create a positive climate, promote dialogue, and generate change, all of which lead to improved outcomes for the special education organization, including management, the professional staff, and ultimately the students as well.

This paper discusses the concept of collective learning from staff members’ successes in a special education school as a resource for professional development. It describes the unique structure of special education schools, as well as the common characteristics of students with severe intellectual disabilities (ID). It explores the importance of OL as a tool, reviews the standard tendency to engage in PBL, and highlights the opportunities and obstacles inherent in this latter type of learning. It then presents the concept of learning from success, the opportunities it presents, and the school principal’s role in implementing this method. The main claim of this concept is that collective learning from successes within special education

organizations can help further advance the staff's professional abilities and improve the quality of their work.

The goal of the research was to examine teachers' perceptions of the process of collective learning from the staff's successes, and to determine the various factors that promote or hinder this process. The research took place at a special education school geared towards students with severe intellectual disabilities (ID). The school is one of the only Board-of-Education-supervised schools in its geographic area that has expertise in working with students with multiple sensory disabilities, many of whom also suffer from complex medical conditions. Limited research and professional literature have focused specifically on this population of students, increasing the importance of further investigating the method of learning from successes in this specific group.

The research population comprised 27 staff members working in a school geared towards students aged 3–21 with severe ID. The research was carried out using 15 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. This study gave rise to four categories of analyzing the research subject. The first category examines the staff members' primary perceptions about learning from successes. The second checks the manner in which learning from successes can affect the quality of teaching and professionalism. The third explores how staff members view the school's learning culture, and the final category inspects staff members' perceptions about factors that promote or hinder the process of learning from successes among the staff.

The main findings of this research indicate several primary perceptions by teachers regarding learning from successes, and a conscious change from PBL to learning from success, as well as the fact that the latter approach is perceived as an enriching experience and a successful learning model that will contribute to the staff's

professional development. The research further indicates four major factors that influence learning from successes: resources that are pertinent to learning, staff attitudes, the learning culture as well as diverse learning channels, and the role of management, which is a key factor when implementing learning from successes.

The paper concludes with various implications regarding school principals, who are instrumental to implementing learning from success in special education frameworks and specifically in schools geared towards students with severe ID. Finally, in light of the stated limitations of this research, numerous suggestions are made for further research.