

**Ethical Dilemmas Arising from the Employment of Physically  
Disabled Teachers: Developing a Multi-Dimensional Approach**

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## **Abstract**

Teachers with disabilities, like most others with disabilities, are often excluded from the public domain and from fields of research (Loden, 2005; Oliver, 2017). Similarly, professional colleagues of these teachers are rarely invited to take part in research studies (Makris, 2012; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). Yet, there is a growing consensus among researchers about the unique contribution of these individuals when it comes to educating different groups of students (Dvir, 2015; Loden & Teets, 2007; Vogel, & Sharoni, 2011).

The lack of research in this subject, on the one hand, and the conclusions about the impact of teachers with disabilities on the other hand, reflect the necessity of conducting such a study, an in-depth study that focuses on the relevant issues which shed light on the dilemmas that these people face on a daily basis.

The purpose of this research is to present and discuss the ethical dilemmas that stem from the employment of physically disabled teachers from multiple points-of-view. Therefore, it is important to define from the outset what exactly is an ethical dilemma. By definition an ethical dilemma is a type of internal moral conflict. A person conflicted over an ethical dilemma would have to choose between different options that contradict each other, when each specific option represents a value that is important to him/her (Burkhardt & Nathaniel, 2002; Glanz, 2010). This particular research focused on the ethical dilemmas of teachers with physical disabilities, on the school principals who employ them, and on the professional colleagues of these specific teachers.

The main goal of this research was to reveal the most significant ethical dilemmas of the participants. In order to do so, the study explores the similarities and differences between each of the groups' respective dilemmas (teachers, principals, and colleagues). In addition, it deals with the essence of each of these dilemmas themselves according to the different sub-groups of disabilities (visible or invisible disability, motor disability, medical disability, or sensor disability).

In order to examine these issues precisely, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 teachers with physical disabilities, 20 school principals who employ at least one of them, and 20 professional colleagues of at least one teacher with a physical disability. This research was conducted using a qualitative method in order to allow the

participants to focus on the issues at hand that were the most important in their eyes (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016). Analysis of these interviews was carried out according to grounded theory while using the perspective of disability studies. Ultimately, this research is part of the overall larger field of disability studies, an interdisciplinary academic field that analyzes the integration of people with disabilities into society, and challenges the narrow definition of what constitutes a disability, as well as the medical model of a disability (Oliver, 2017).

The main findings illustrate the ethical dilemmas of the participants' groups, and shed light on the crucial issues that arise from the employment of teachers with disabilities.

Among teachers with disabilities, it was found that there are four major ethical dilemmas that have a profound influence on their professional lives:

*The Coming-out-of-the-disability-closet dilemma-* reflects the dilemma of whether to expose or to conceal one's disability while in the work place (the school). This specific ethical dilemma comes from three conflicting values: personal welfare, transparency, and honesty. Only teachers with invisible disabilities mentioned that this was a major challenge that they faced in their careers.

*The 'healthy' self-dilemma-* This dilemma came to light only among teachers with chronic/long-term health disabilities. The 'healthy' self-dilemma reflects one's desire to do everything possible to take care of oneself physically on the one hand, and the aspiration to achieve personal/professional fulfillment on the other hand. When it comes to this particular dilemma, it is clear that one cannot insist on receiving all the necessary medical treatment on time without it also conflicting with one's job as a teacher.

*The disability presence dilemma-* Many teachers referred to the different ways in which their disability might become an issue in the classroom or outside of it. These teachers explained that they must decide to what extent they are willing to allow their disability to be present in any given situation. They discussed their desire to act as "normal" as possible, on the one hand, while still being their "true selves" – a person with a disability, on the other hand.

*The Equality dilemma-* This dilemma arises from different interpretations of the concept of equality. Teachers with disabilities believe that individuals with these types of conditions are completely equal to those without them, and have the same potential as any other teacher. At the same time though, they believe that people with disabilities have the inherent right to receive appropriate adjustments that would allow them to better integrate into the workplace. According to their experiences, they constantly have to cope with this gap and with the question of whether or not to demand adjustments (and if so, to what extent).

Two main ethical dilemmas also came to light among school principals who employ teachers with a disability: the dilemma over the actual decision to hire that teacher, and the dilemma that arises from working together with that individual.

*The employment dilemma-* Principals who seek to hire a new teacher at their school, and then discover that the potential hiree has a disability, must consider the consequences of such a move. This decision is based on both a set of considerations focusing on what is best for the school, and on that principal's personal ideological views about the importance of inclusion in the workplace. The principal's considerations for the school's welfare and his/her ideological view about inclusion can sometimes contradict each other.

*The "Between personal and professional" dilemma-* Integrating teachers with disabilities into schools has the potential to cause difficulties as well as positive experiences. This dilemma arises from a conflict between three values: integration into the school system, personal commitment towards the individual teacher, and professional commitment to the school as an institution.

Among professional colleagues of teachers with disabilities, it was found that there are two existing dilemmas: the "loyalty" dilemma and the "between-values-and-personal" dilemma. The "loyalty" dilemma encompasses the tension that comes about from one's loyalty to the teacher versus one's loyalty to the pupils. The "between-values-and-personal" dilemma reflects the overriding tension between the values of inclusion versus the need to safeguard one's own personal interests.

In addition to these ethical dilemmas, the research data also revealed several other significant trends in the employment of teachers with disabilities:

*The disability as an educational tool-* The teachers' interviews pointed out a pattern of viewing one's disability as something that has an educational value. Some of the teachers with disabilities who were interviewed mentioned having added opportunities to educate their students, promote meaningful values, and teach empathy, all because of their disability. Furthermore, the school principals and professional colleagues saw the individual teacher's disability as an opportunity to inculcate in students the values of equality and acceptance of the other.

*The attitude and role of the principal-* Another relevant theme that came to light in this research concerned the importance of the principal's role. It became clear that those principals who had a positive attitude towards the teacher's disability coped well with the challenges of his/her employment at the school. Conversely, principals who either purposely or inadvertently projected prejudice and/or stigma towards the teacher with the disability tended to have an estranged and wary relationship with him/her. Not surprisingly, the other colleagues who worked with these teachers thought that the principal's attitude was very important, and they were indeed very critical of any principal who did not treat the teacher with the disability with the utmost respect and professionalism.

This research study attempts to open a window towards the complexity of employment of people with disabilities while using a multi-dimensional approach. In many ways it is the first of its kind since it examines the ethical dilemmas connected to the employment of people with disabilities from different points of view (teachers, principals, and professional colleagues). In addition, focusing on the ethical dilemmas of teachers with disabilities has the potential to be innovative and unique since previous research into this subject matter almost always focused on the authority figure and the subject of authority (doctor and patient, principal and teachers, teacher and pupils, etc.). This research is in fact unique because it focuses on the actual disadvantaged population "with disabilities".

The findings of this research study emphasize the necessity of raising the awareness of policy makers to the contribution of as well as to the challenges of employing teachers with disabilities. However, raising awareness of the unfulfilled needs of teachers and principals is not enough when confronting such issues. It is therefore recommended to build a well laid-out program that would further assist teachers with disabilities and

inform them of their inherent rights. A well-organized initiative like this would likely help exploit to the fullest the talent and contribution of these teachers who are currently working in the education system, and would of course prevent them from leaving as a consequence of failing to accommodate them. Ultimately, the positive findings about the unique contribution of teachers with disabilities may in the future lead to a policy of hiring more of such individuals in the Israeli education system which would no doubt be mutually beneficial for both those teachers and for the school system.