

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Attitudes towards Inclusion of Students
with Conduct Disorders in the Regular
Class and the Degree of Empathy towards
Them: A Comparison between Teachers,
Parents and Members of the Peer Group**

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Abstract

The issue of inclusion of students with conduct disorders in the regular education system is largely influenced by attitudes and opinions of the reference groups towards them. The reference groups are: peer group members - students in the regular education system without conduct disorders whose class included student with conduct disorder, their teachers and their parents. The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of these three groups towards both the inclusion of students with conduct disorders in the regular education system and the disorder itself. In addition, a comparison has been made between the levels of empathy of the three groups towards students with conduct disorders.

The American law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1975) and subsequently the Israeli law (Special Education Law, 1988) paved the way for the process of inclusion of students with special needs in the regular education system. According to American law (1975), the intention to include students who have special needs with regular students, is based on the idea that cutting off an individual from his/her natural environment is a bad one.

Among the included students, there are also students with conduct disorder.

This disorder is characterized by expressing aggression towards others, destroying property of others deliberately, lying and breaking rules in general. The inclusion of these students in the regular class is a significant challenge in the daily work of teachers as demonstrated in various studies.

The literature review shows that most studies about inclusion examined the attitudes of teachers, parents or students without special needs (hereinafter: regular students) towards the inclusion of students with various disabilities as one unit.

Occasionally, there were studies comparing various disabilities and conduct disorders,

but they did not focus on students with conduct disorders alone. One of these studies examined attitudes of teachers towards including six different groups of children with disabilities. The researchers found out that the disability type has an impact on the willingness of teachers to include students with special needs in the regular class (Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2004).

In light of this, I have decided in this paper to concentrate on writing about children with conduct disorders and to examine the varying attitudes of the receiving environment's members towards inclusion of those students in the regular education system.

During the last two decades, many studies have been conducted on the attitudes of educators towards including children with special needs. Their assumption was that the attitudes of educators are a crucial factor affecting their willingness to provide the appropriate educational opportunities for these students, and their willingness to contribute to their success. In some of the studies, the teachers supported the inclusion process, and in others - opposed it. In addition, it was found that the willingness of teachers to include students with conduct disorders was lower than their willingness to include children with other disabilities. Some studies have also been conducted on attitudes of parents of children without special needs and regular students' attitudes towards inclusion. In some of these studies, both parents and students supported the inclusion, while in others - opposed it. Several studies showed less willingness of parents and regular students to include students with conduct disorders compared to their willingness to include children with other disabilities.

As for the comparison between all three reference groups, a review of the literature revealed some few studies comparing teachers' attitudes and the attitudes of

parents of children without special needs towards the inclusion of students with special needs. The findings show that teachers have more positive attitudes towards inclusion than the parents. Regular students attitudes compared to teachers' and parents' attitudes received little attention in these studies. So far, no studies have compared all the attitudes of **all** three groups regarding the inclusion of students with special needs, focusing on students with conduct disorders.

Very few studies have examined the attitudes of teachers, parents and regular students towards conduct disorders. In some of these studies, teachers tended to rate the severity of conduct disorders at the highest level, while in others, parents are the ones who rated the severity of the disorders at the highest level among the three groups. In all of these studies, the regular students perceived the severity of these disorders at the lowest level compared to the other two groups.

It is commonly known that the level of empathy has an impact on the attitude and behavior of individuals towards others. Hence, my study also examines the level of empathy among the three reference groups towards students with conduct disorders. It should be noted, there was no prior comprehensive study comparing this variable among the three reference groups. However, as mentioned, studies found a positive effect of empathy on the individual's attitude towards the other. Therefore, my hypothesis was that this variable would act in a similar manner as the attitudes of the three groups towards the inclusion of students with conduct disorders. In other words, those who hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion will express greater empathy toward the included students. Also, studies have shown that empathy is a core component in the work of the teacher. Therefore, I assumed teachers would have more empathy towards included students than parents of children without special needs.

Following the above, my thesis examines three hypotheses alongside their main research questions: (1) Teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with conduct disorders would be more positive than those of the parents, while examining the regular students' attitudes compared to those of the teachers and of the parents; (2) Teachers and parents would perceive the students' conduct disorders as more severe than the regular students, while examining the difference in perception of the severity between the teachers and the parents; (3) The teachers' level of empathy towards included students with conduct disorders would be higher than the parents' level of empathy, while examining the regular students' level of empathy compared to that of the teachers and of the parents.

The sample of my study included four schools, in the central region, which implemented the inclusion policy. In every school, a class was randomly selected (fifth or seventh grade) which included student with conduct disorder. The sampling consisted of 82 regular education system teachers, 89 parents of children without conduct disorders, and 88 students of regular schools whose classes included student with conduct disorder. The participants were given forms of several questionnaires: personal information; "*Attitudes towards Integrating the Child with Special Needs*"; "*Evaluation of Children's Behavior*"; and "*Empathy*".

The findings of the research did not confirm the first hypothesis: teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with conduct disorders were more negative than the parents' attitudes. Teachers who are in charge of implementing the process of inclusion and its success, thought that they do not have adequate training, and that the regular class does not meet the needs of the included students. It was also found that the regular students' attitudes towards including children with conduct disorders were more positive than those of the teachers. Regular students showed greater openness

regarding the inclusion of students with conduct disorders, and they saw the positive impact of the inclusion on themselves and on the included students. In addition, it was found that the regular students' attitudes towards including children with conduct disorders were more positive than those of their parents. Parents were worried that included students' difficulties may negatively effect on the teachers' attention towards their own children.

The findings partially confirmed the second hypothesis: parents perceived aggressive behavior of the included students as more severe than the regular students. It is safe to assume that the parents were worried about the sake of their children from the aggressive behavior of the included student with conduct disorder. It was also found that teachers perceived the included students' Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as more severe than the regular students' perception. In this case, the teachers, who are responsible for students' achievements, were more concerned about the effect of the included students with conduct disorders (some of whom also suffer from ADHD) on the learning process and its quality. However, contrary to second hypothesis which was proposed, it was found that the regular students perceived the emotional difficulties of the included students as more severe than the teachers. The regular students may have found it difficult to understand the included students' emotional difficulties, since it is known that young people have less developed empathic abilities than adults. Moreover, it was found that teachers perceived the included students' ADHD as more severe compared to the parents. Possibly, as aforesaid, the teachers, who are responsible for students' achievements, were more concerned than the parents about the effect of the included students on the learning quality. Perhaps the teachers even were more worried about the effects of

ADHD on the classroom atmosphere, due to their daily experience and close proximity with this disorder.

The findings partially confirmed the third hypothesis: it was found that the teachers' level of empathy towards included student with conduct disorder was higher than that of the parents. One possible explanation is that teaching is a profession which requires empathy. Also, possibly due to the fact that teachers are spending time on a daily basis with the included students, they formed a close relation with them, enabling them to express empathy towards them. It was also found that the teachers' and parents' level of empathy toward students with conduct disorders were higher than that of the regular students. These findings can be explained by studies noted above, which had shown that adults have more developed empathic abilities.

The conclusion of my study stresses the fundamental need to closely observe the inclusion process from the unique perspective of each of the three reference groups, and to meet the needs of the difficulties which each group experiencing during the inclusion process of the children with conduct disorders. The study also highlights and emphasizes the importance of fostering empathy among the reference groups (particularly among parents and regular students) towards included students with conduct disorders.

I believe that the implementation of these recommendations will lead to more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with conduct disorders in regular education system, among the reference groups who take part in the inclusion process, and thus, bringing a better chance of its success. The educational policy makers and the administrators of schools (which implement the inclusion process) need to take into consideration the issue of the different attitudes and empathy levels of these three reference groups.