Current Best Practices in Learning Disabilities in Israel

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We present an analysis of the current state of practice in the diagnosis and treatment of learning disabilities (LD) in Israel. Through an examination of the cultural, historical, and demographic background of the country (“deep structures”), we show how a fragmented society has developed; it segregates different ethnicities and social groups and has led to an educational system (“surface structures”) that perpetuates that separation. Special education law also reflects and perpetuates that social reality. However, since 2002, the Israeli Ministry of Education, through legislation and ministerial guidelines, has embarked on a mission to include children with LD fully in the general education curriculum. This change is meaningful, because it is foreign to the Israeli educational perspective. The development of a response-to-intervention model that includes a specialist (called a Matal) charged with providing diagnostic and prescriptive case management is still in its experimental phase and its efficacy has yet to be evaluated. However, adoption of this model has already had an effect on the testing and diagnosis of LD. Future trajectories of Israeli LD are also discussed.

THE CURRENT STATE OF LEARNING DISABILITIES IN ISRAEL

National systems of public education develop through the interplay between larger sociohistorical, demographic, and bureaucratic requirements. Understanding a country’s provision of services to children with special educational needs in order to conduct both inter- and intranational analyses necessitates an understanding of these “deep structures” (i.e., the sociohistorical milieu) and how they affect the system’s everyday functioning, or “surface structures” (Gumpel & Awartani, 2003). Likewise, understanding the current state of learning disabilities (LD) in Israel necessitates an understanding of the Israeli social–historical milieu as well as the special and general education system from which it developed. Indeed, through an examination of the vagaries of Israeli society and the Israeli educational system, it becomes clear that the current Israeli practices in LD are a natural result of cultural and educational evolutionary processes, but at the same time they are a radical step away from many aspects of the Israeli cultural and educational perspective. To examine this issue, we first examine some social and cultural issues shaping the current Israeli practices in LD, focusing on service provision and the move toward the provision of services solely in general education settings, and related personnel preparation issues. We conclude by outlining what we see as some possible future trajectories regarding some current issues in Israeli LD.

Understanding the Israeli political and historical environment from a sociohistorical point of view is a necessary precondition for understanding current debates and dilemmas in the Israeli school system. These histories are complex, as anyone who follows the news from the Middle East will appreciate; we hope to simplify, yet not trivialize, these issues and show how they have affected and will continue to affect the Israeli educational system. To do this, we first offer a primer in Israeli history and demography in which we present, in broad strokes, the salient aspects of the Israeli cultural and educational experience and how it is related to the current Israeli practices in the education and treatment of children with LD.

AN ISRAELI PRIMER

Israel is a small country (20,770 sq. km) with a primarily industrial and service-oriented economy (96.5 percent). The population of 6.8 million is composed of two primary ethnic groups, Jewish and Israeli-Arabs who hold Israeli citizenship and are either Muslims or Christians (Bassok, 2004). There are four primary religions and ethnicities represented in the country: Jewish (81.5 percent); Muslim, predominantly Sunni (14.6 percent); Christian (2.1 percent); and Druze and Bedouins (1.8 percent); the last two are ethnic groups affiliated with the Arab sector. Israel boasts a literacy rate of 95 percent among those over the age of 15. Despite the fact that Israeli-Arabs constitute only 18.5 percent of the entire population, they account for 24.75 percent of the school-age
population (Ministry of Education, 2005), implying a young population, a high birth rate, and future demographic changes in the state’s ethnic mix.

Within this relatively small, densely populated country one can find a veritable mosaic of demographies, ideologies, and histories. For instance, the Jewish population can be roughly divided into four groups: secular, traditional (keeps some sort of Jewish traditions and holidays; would be considered “reform” or “conservative” Judaism in the United States), religious (would be considered “orthodox” Judaism in the United States; men are noticeably visible by the knitted yarmulke), and ultraorthodox (who live in separate communities, often known as “Hassidic Jews” in the United States; men are noticeably visible by their black suits, hats, and long beards). This mixture of groups is evident in everyday life in Israel: street signs and products are in Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian, and sometimes Amharic. Neighborhoods, villages, towns, and sometimes even cities are known by their ethnic or linguistic distinctiveness. Religious affiliation and political parties cater to specific constituencies, so that in Israel (unlike in the United States) political representation is not by geographical location but by ideological identification.

Israel was founded in 1948 based on the Zionist movement established by Theodor Herzl (1860–1904). Herzl’s views on the imperative for a Jewish state in Palestine took hold, and Zionist policy became part of British foreign policy. Following the Armistice of 1918, Palestine was ceded to the United Kingdom, and an active period of settlement of Palestine by European Jews began. The migration continued despite political and military impediments posed by the indigenous Arab population, and in 1948 the British mandate in Palestine drew to a close with the formation of the State of Israel. The definition of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state has presented myriad problems for its indigenous non-Jewish population; for example, infrastructure and educational services have been consistently underfunded since Israel was formed, leaving a dearth of highly educated Israeli-Arab professionals in the mainstream economy.

The Educational System

As a nation of immigrants, the educational system has always been charged as the primary vehicle for diminishing the differences among immigrants and between immigrants and vatikim (Hebrew for old-timers) and for ensuring social, political, cultural, and economic mobility for all. This process has been tested once again with the fall and breakup of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Between 1989 and 1991 Israel was deluged with waves of Soviet immigrants. During these years, the educational and social support systems were called upon to acculturate approximately 376,000 new citizens (an increase in the population of about 7.8 percent in 2 years; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998).

Another smaller, yet equally challenging, immigrant group consists of immigrants from Ethiopia. Ethiopian or Falasha Jews arrived in Israel in two primary waves: “Operation Moses,” lasted from the early and mid-1980s and included 8,000 immigrants, and “Operation Solomon” in 1991, which included 14,000 immigrants. Today, there are approximately 56,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996). Ethiopian immigration posed unique problems for the absorbing society as well. Immigrants from Ethiopia arrived at about the same time as when Israel was reeling from the mass immigration of Jews from the FSU; high unemployment (11 percent) and inflation (18 percent) resulted (Jewish Virtual Library, 2003). Ethiopian immigrants had lived primarily in small villages in mountainous regions of Ethiopia and were primarily subsistence farmers with a close-knit social structure and family life. Life in Israel, a modern and Westernized nation, was radically different. The absorption of this small, culturally distinct group brought many unique challenges: housing, social integration, and employment. Educational challenges, specifically, were extreme, because access to education was limited in Ethiopia, with most adults receiving little or no formal education (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996).

Obviously, these challenging waves of immigration have clear implications for the provisions of services for low-achieving students and those with LD. Assessing and providing instruction to culturally diverse and sometimes pre-literate populations have strained the nation’s special educational services to the limits as it attempts to distinguish between cultural and linguistic differences, underachievement, and LD. For instance, in Israel LD professionals rapidly developed expertise in working with many of the distinct subgroups emerging from the FSU, each with its own complex problems, where few trained professionals exist with similar cultural backgrounds, all against a backdrop of severe budgetary problems caused by the incessant drain of the large military expenditures that Israeli society carries (Gumpel & Nir, 2005). The case is extreme for Ethiopian immigrants, Bedouins, and other Arabic indigenous populations where there are few trained LD specialists conversant in the native languages and there are few, if any, diagnostic materials in those languages. These populations also suffer from systemic poverty, high dropout rates, and neglect by repeated administrations within the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2005; Shafir & Peled, 2003).

Constant growth is endemic to the Israeli educational system. The number of pupils enrolled in the educational system increased by more than 16-fold over a period of 57 years, from 108,131 pupils in 1948 to 1,723,300 pupils in 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2005). The number of immigrant pupils is also continually increasing, from about 1.5 percent in 1991 to approximately 11 percent in 1996 (Ministry of Education—Culture and Sport, 1996), as is the number of immigrant teachers (1,950 teachers in 1992 to 5,150 in 1996). More than 37,000 pupils study in special education frameworks and an additional 40,000 pupils in general education frameworks receive special assistance (Ministry of Education—Culture and Sport, 1998). The annual dropout rates for pupils in upper secondary education is about 4.8 percent in Jewish education and 11.8 percent in Arab education (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001). National expenditure on education places Israel among the highest-investing countries in public education in comparison with other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Ministry of Education, 2005); however, on international comparisons
in reading, problem solving, and mathematical and scientific literacy, Israeli schoolchildren and youth consistently underperform as compared to their peers in most Western countries (Gumpel & Nir, 2005).

Teacher Education

The mass immigration and the rapid growth of the educational system focused attention on the quality of teacher education and led to the massive development of teacher-training programs initially offered by postsecondary institutions called “seminars” or teaching colleges. Teacher training in Israel is accomplished according to a government-dictated master plan; higher education is tightly controlled by the Council for Higher Education, which controls all aspects of degree allocations and curricula. In Israel there are six universities, all of which are designated as research and doctoral granting universities where faculty are actively engaged primarily in research agendas in basic science. Schools of education in these universities do not engage in teacher-training activities. In those instances where the universities do engage in teacher certification, they provide teaching certificates to students possessing a baccalaureate degree in a specific content area; however, they provide little or no training in the “pedagogic arts.” Throughout the country, teaching colleges exist that specialize in teacher training. Some of these colleges have strict curricular requirements and are closely aligned with the Ministry of Education and there has been a growing trend over the last several years to ensure that all faculty members at these elite colleges have a Ph.D. in their respective fields. These colleges offer a B.Ed. degree and some are now offering a M.Ed. as well. However, other colleges have less rigid entrance requirements and/or curricular guidelines.

In general, teacher-training colleges have had primary responsibility for preparing elementary school teachers (B.Ed.-level). Secondary school teachers, certified by the universities, often have a B.A. in their respective subject area and a teaching certificate, sometimes without pedagogical training. Some of the colleges have high academic standards, but others do not. In keeping with the highly fragmented constituencies of all of Israeli society and the Israeli school system, many of the teacher-training colleges are aligned with specific groups (i.e., Jewish secular, Jewish religious, Jewish ultraorthodox, Muslim colleges) and each constituency emphasizes different aspects of the curriculum and refuses to be evaluated by representatives or superintendents of competing constituencies. For example, a teaching college for a specific Jewish ultraorthodox sect, despite requiring that its students complete the same number of credit hours as students in any other college, will mandate more hours of study of religious texts and deemphasize math, science, and other subjects considered too Western. Such variation, of course, has a direct effect on the quality and uniformity of special and general education professionals and their ability to deal with the heterogeneity of Israeli classrooms.

Another important aspect to consider when examining the recruitment, training, and retention of Israeli general and special education teachers is their salary. Israeli teachers are poorly paid; for example, the salary for a teacher with 5 years of seniority falls well below the average national salary. In a study by the OECD, the purchasing power of the salaries of Israeli elementary teachers with 15 years of experience was less than half of the OECD average ($17,000 yearly salary vs. average OECD $35,000; Arlosoroff, 2007). This fact has a severe impact on the governments’ ability to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. Obviously, such a condition contributes to the high teacher burnout prevalent in the Israeli school system (Friedman, 1996, 2000).

The Bureaucratic Structure

In the 2005 school year, the Israeli educational system included 3,652 schools or 52,000 classrooms (including schools for children with special needs) as well as 94,000 teaching jobs (Ministry of Education, 2005). The public school structure is divided into four main stages, following the reform implemented in the entire school system in 1968, which extended compulsory and free education from the 8th to the 10th grade: kindergarten (from ages 5 to 6), elementary school (grades 1 through 6), middle school (grades 7 through 9), and high school (grades 10 through 12).

Two additional sectors whose schools belong to the official school system are Israeli-Arabs and Druze (Ministry of Education—Culture and Sport, 1988). Both groups regard themselves as part of the Arab world by virtue of shared culture and language, which manifests itself in the existence of separate institutions, teachers, and curricula, where teaching is almost exclusively conducted in Arabic. The structure of these schools and the curricula studied are analogous to those in the Jewish sector, with necessary changes to accommodate the different language and cultural needs. These schools are centrally supervised and controlled by the Directorate of the Arabic Education and Culture Department at the Ministry and all structural and thematic changes introduced in Hebrew education are also implemented in Arab and Druze schools.

Although variations exist in the number of teaching hours dedicated in the curriculum for various issues by each trend or sector, there are several core issues that are studied in all Israeli elementary schools. Finally, Christian-Arabs and ultraorthodox Jews are two additional sectors receiving educational services. This group of schools consists of Arab Mission schools supervised and controlled by the Catholic Church and Jewish traditional Talmud-Torahs supervised by ultraorthodox political parties and the rabbis of the ultraorthodox community. A breakdown of the different systems is summarized in Figure 1.

In sum, then, we can see that the Israeli school system reflects Israeli society as a whole along with its historical and cultural legacies. Besides being a nation of immigrants, Israel has a large and young indigenous population composed primarily of Israeli-Arabs. In addition, six major religious trends are represented within the educational system: Jewish secular and traditional, Jewish religious, Jewish ultraorthodox, Muslim, Christian, and Druze. Each ethnicity and religious group has separate social institutions, villages, neighborhoods, customs, and traditions as well as bureaucratic machinery in the Ministry of Education. Such highly
segmented and segregated society will influence the educational system. How does this situation manifest itself in the provision of services to students with LD?

THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The foundation for understanding Israeli special education is the Special Education Law of 1988 (SEL). The SEL marked a turning point in the provision of special education services to children and adolescents with special needs in Israel and was passed with multiparty support in 1988 with hopes that it would create procedural certainty and codify guidelines where none had previously existed (Gumpel, 1996). Examination of the legislative intent of the Israeli parliament (the unicameral Knesset) reveals a basic conceptualization of disability among Israeli lawmakers at the same time as it advocates for a segregationist and categorical perception of service provision. All children receiving special education services are divided into twelve different eligibility categories based on their primary disability (Gumpel, 1999b), with LD being the largest category based on number of children, followed by emotional and behavioral problems. The special educational system has been historically dominated in Israel by neuropsychologists, pediatricians, and psychologists and based on a medical and pathology-based model of impairment (Greenspan, 1997).

From the law’s opening lines, which define the scope of the law, the Ministry of Education has repeatedly claimed that the law mandates separate education of all children with special educational needs, including those children with diagnosed LD (Gumpel, 1999a, b). This opening section provides operational definitions and begins with the definition of “the handicapped child” and “special education.” These two definitions provide an interesting tautology: the “handicapped child” is defined as “[a] person aged three to twenty-one, whose capacity for adaptive behaviors is limited, due to faulty physical, mental, psychological or behavioral development, and is in need of special education” (Special Education Law of 4758, 1988, p. 2930). On the other hand, special education is defined as “methodological teaching, learning and treatment granted by law to the handicapped child . . . .” (p. 2930). These circular definitions exemplify the confusion regarding exclusionary versus inclusionary special services: for a child to be defined as “handicapped,” he or she must be taught in a “special education” framework, which is then defined as a framework provided only to children with “handicaps.” In other words, to be defined as a person with a “handicap,” one needs to be enrolled in a segregated special education system. Being enrolled outside of a segregated system according to the ministry means that one is no longer “handicapped” and therefore no longer entitled to financial support from the Department of Special Education. Indeed, from 1988 to 2002, virtually all children undergoing a placement committee hearing were placed in some sort of restrictive environment.

Under the SEL, a student experiencing difficulties was referred to a school psychologist, whose evaluation included both psychological (i.e., intelligence, personality, and cognitive) batteries and some academic testing. If the diagnostic process determined that the child did, indeed, possess LD, he or she came under the jurisdiction of the Department of Special Education of the Ministry of Education. Placement in an educational framework was then decided by a Placement Committee (Gumpel, 1996), which is a statutory committee in which the child’s parents may or may not participate (they can be invited, but their presence is not mandated). The Placement Committee can decide on placement in a segregated school setting or a special day class in a general education setting. Parents have the right to appeal the decision; however the decision of the Appeals Committee is final.

In 2002, the SEL was revised following a series of court cases brought about by parents who argued that the law, as written, was restrictive in that it allowed only for education of children with special needs in segregated set-
tions. The 2002 revisions to the 1988 special education law (Instructions Chapter D1 for Special Education Law, 4763 [Correction number 7 for Special Education Law, 1988], 2002), changed the wording in the law from a “handicapped child” (Special Education Law of 4758, 1988) to an “included child” (Instructions Chapter D1 for Special Education Law, 4763 [Correction number 7 for Special Education Law, 1988], 2002) and a statutory forum was developed in every school with the authority to determine the eligibility for all children with special needs in the school for assistance and inclusionary support. Such support may include, but is not limited to, different types of pull-out programs, support services to improve written and spoken expression, psychological support services, and other types of assistance, and the development of individualized educational plans. Further, guidance from the Ministry’s Director General further highlighted the importance of inclusionary practices: “Most students with special needs can be included into a regular classroom with the aid of an inclusion plan and can derive great academic and social–emotional benefit from such inclusion” (Director General—Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1).²

Definition of LD

The Ministry of Education has adopted the definition of LD put forth by the American National Joint Council on Learning Disabilities (Director General—Ministry of Education, 2000, 2004; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1985/1994) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) requiring a substantial discrepancy between academic performance and intellectual abilities as measured by (1) a criterion-referenced achievement performance test and (2) a norm-referenced intelligence test. Through new legislation to determine and fix assessment practices in LD, the Ministry has formally rejected the relevance of the responsiveness-to-intervention (RTI) model (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003) as being relevant to the definition and assessment of LD. The Ministry of Education put a cap on the number of children with LD in the school system at approximately 10 percent (Director General—Ministry of Education, 2004).

Diagnosing LD in Israel has fallen under the purview of psychologists and neuropsychologists who conduct testing in two primary areas: psychological and academic. Psychological testing examines issues of cognition, metacognition, and intelligence and often includes personality and projective tests. Academic testing includes tests in basic academic skills such as reading comprehension and basic mathematical abilities. In addition, if needed, evaluations by professionals from related services such as speech and language, sensory impairment, and occupational therapy, will be solicited (Director General—Ministry of Education, 2004).

Students who are found eligible by a placement committee because of LD usually receive services in one of three scenarios. First, children may be assigned to separate schools run by the Department of Special Education of the Ministry; these schools are designed to serve students who have many and severe LD. The second outcome leads to provision of services in the general education setting according to the 2002 correction to the Special Education Law (Director General—Ministry of Education, 2003); there students with LD are placed where they can study in the more academically challenging middle school environments. The third outcome primarily affects services in the secondary setting and relates to the structure of Israeli secondary education; to be eligible for testing accommodations on state-run exit examinations or for an exemption from a given requirement (e.g., foreign language), students must have a documented and verified LD. In Israel, each child graduating from high school must pass a series of matriculation or state-run exit examinations.

Clearly, the influence of the diagnostician is substantial, and the attractiveness of being trained as an academic diagnostician is obvious for any special education faculty member deluged with students without teaching experience wishing to become diagnosticians. There appear to be three primary reasons. First, one does not need to be trained as a psychologist or neuropsychologist and endure all the rigor and time that such training entails. Second, the salary of a beginning teacher is notoriously low; however, the private fees charged by many diagnosticians are extremely high. Indeed, by evaluating three to four children a month, one can easily match a teacher’s monthly salary. Third, with low salaries comes low prestige. Being directly associated with the Ministry of Education as a teacher is considered “not glamorous,” and many preservice individuals are searching for what they perceive as a “glamorous” way to work with children with special needs while staying out of the classroom and away from the Ministry. Institutions of higher learning, faced with competition and reduced enrollment, are capitalizing on these points and opening departments geared only for the training of professionals to work with children and youth with LD and where academic testing becomes a large part of their training. Such departments now exist in two universities in the country and enrollment is strong despite the fact that students in these programs have little training in fields comorbid with LD (i.e., emotional and behavioral problems, behavioral interventions, and mild intellectual impairment), and teaching experience is not a prerequisite for acceptance. As of 2007, the situation has become so problematic that the government has recently introduced legislation to ensure uniformity in the training and instruments used in the evaluation of LD and requires at least 5 years of teaching experience before one can be further trained as a diagnostician.

Service Delivery

Service delivery for students with LD has traditionally taken place in two different settings. Historically, before 2002, because of the exclusive nature of the SEL, special education services were provided solely in segregated settings. Still today, in each city or community in the country, some children with LD are bussed to segregated schools that specialize in teaching children with these conditions. Moreover, due to the highly segmented nature of the Israeli educational system, in most communities several such schools coexist, serving different constituencies and with bureaucratic support.
systems (Gumpel, 1996). For instance, in the nation’s capital of Jerusalem (population 720,000), four segregated elementary schools for children with LD coexist, one each for the Jewish secular, the Jewish religious, the Jewish ultraorthodox, and the Arab communities. Each school has its own superintendent, support staff, and budgetary machinery, and each school suffers from a dwindling population of pupils as more and more children are served in the general educational system. However, there remains no contact among any of these four schools nor their bureaus in the Ministry of Education, despite the fact that all are funded by the state.

**Provision of Services in the General Education System**

Despite the fact that discussion of integration began during the 1950s, it only began to gain momentum following legislation of the SEL and the implementation of the law in the early 1990s, as many children who previously received services in segregated settings began to receive services within the general education framework (Avishar & Layser, 2000; Comptroller’s Office, 2001; Margalit, 1999). The final impetus for inclusion and nonseparation of children with LD came with the changes to the SEL in 2002 (Instructions Chapter D1 for Special Education Law, 4763 [Correction number 7 for Special Education Law, 1988], 2002) and as a result of a blue-ribbon panel headed by Professor Malka Margalit of Tel Aviv University. This “Margalit Report” called for the integration of students with LD and general education students and the increased training of professionals working with children and youth with LD (Margalit, 1997), especially in the Israeli-Arab sector. An important byproduct of the Margalit Report is the de facto removal of LD as one of the 12 categories under the responsibility of the Department of Special Education in the Ministry of Education. Instead, a new division was formed within the Psychological and Counseling Services Department (the Division of Learning Disabilities) to deal with LD issues. This bureaucratic shift symbolizes, among other things, a clear shifting in priorities from a segregated to an inclusive philosophy for children and youth with LD.

In 2007, most children with LD are included and never separated from the general education framework. Because at least some of these pupils may need special assistance to enable them to be included in the general education framework, the educational system has changed. One change was the development of the “special education specialist” (Mitchell, 2004). The second chapter of the Margalit Report dealt with pre- and in-service training and recommended the development of interdisciplinary college and university-level programs to train professionals in the area of LD and specifically recommended the development of the LD specialist (the Hebrew acronym—*Matal*). Such training, according to the report, would focus on developmental psychology (including psychopathology and emotional regulation), neurology, linguistics, and ecological issues, as well cultural and didactic issues (Margalit, 1997, p. 18).

**Matal**

The *Matal* or Educational Performance Diagnostician position encompasses two primary foci on both micro and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). On the micro level, the *Matal* professional has an individual focus that deals mostly with the pupil and his or her parents and teachers and an organizational focus that deals mostly with schoolwide issues. On an individual level, the *Matal* teacher spends most of his or her time evaluating and developing treatment plans for children experiencing difficulties in academic skills (as of 2007, *Matal* teachers only work in the language arts), developing individual inclusion plans, assisting students developing learning strategies (either individually or in group work), or engaging in discussions with general education teachers regarding possible allowances and appropriate accommodations. The *Matal* teacher frequently reports to his or her general education colleagues regarding student progress and possible accommodations to meet his or her individualized educational goals more appropriately, as well as to provide teacher support to ensure smoother transitions for pupils with LD as they are included in all aspects of general educational curricula. In dealing with parents, the *Matal’s* role is to explain testing results, offer guidance, and serve as a case manager.

On the macro level, the *Matal* works within a school’s structure to organize and implement in-service training and to promote organizational health (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993) associated with the integration of children with LD into the general education curriculum and school life. The *Matal* works with all teachers in all academic areas, while at the same time conducting academic testing and program development.

Since 2006, *Matal* teachers are trained through a series of in-service training seminars according to a master plan developed by the Division of Learning Disabilities. These in-service courses are offered to general education teachers with at least 5 years of experience; they last for 3 years and deal with the systemwide and individual identification of children who are experiencing difficulties. Figure 2 depicts the work model for a *Matal* teacher.

This model shows that the responsibility for identifying and developing an intervention plan rests on the school personnel, rather than (as we have previously seen) allowing the school to shunt children having learning difficulties into the formal testing process of the Placement Committee and then segregated special educational frameworks. Accordingly, this in-house iterative model of evaluation, treatment, data collection, and follow-up before the child can be referred for an in-depth diagnostic evaluation is revolutionary from an Israeli service provision point of view. Such a process transfers the burden of evaluating and treating the child with learning difficulties to the classroom and requires documented proof of in-classroom interventions before out-of-school referrals can be made. This decentralized treatment model in the highly centralized Israeli school system is in need of a paradigmatic shift in how school personnel are seeing their professions (Nir, 2003). Classroom and individual functional profiles are developed (currently, the Psychological and Counseling Service of the Ministry of Education is developing a nationwide and normed screening test for LD and underachieving children), children who are able to
reduce the performance gaps between themselves and their peers will no longer be eligible for services, and those who do not will continue to receive services and may even be referred to more intensive services, testing, or both. Despite the fact that the Ministry has rejected much of the RTI model, this treatment model is based on a RTI model (Dadds, Fraser, Frost, & Hawes, 2005; Deschler, Mellard, Toleffson, & Byrd, 2005; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Gresham, Frost, & Hawes, 2005). As anyone who has ever watched the news about Israel will agree, Israel is a complex country. Competing constituencies, demographics, cultures, linguistic traditions, and educational needs all coalesce to form a complex mix where service provision and professional preparation become complex and interconnected. These interrelated groups have always lived side by side in Israel, and Israeli culture and society is built around a de facto recognition of this cultural appreciation of separateness in all aspects of Israeli life. Special education policy reflects cultural mores and does not create them, and this is evident in the Israeli context as well. The SEL, as written, is a highly categorical and segregative law, reflecting a highly categorical and segregative society.

In this light, one must reexamine the complex changes taking place in the delivery of services to children and youth with LD in Israel. LD policy is rapidly moving to keep the identification and treatment of children with LD in the child’s school setting using parts of an RTI paradigm. Such a decentralized model, while severely limiting the ability of the school to push children with LD immediately into the segregated special education system will also empower the teacher and school to develop its human resources in this area—resources which, as long as they were allowed to divest themselves easily of students experiencing learning problems, rarely had to develop. It is impossible to predict how this will affect other aspects of teachers’ professional lives, such as aspects of their professional self-efficacy, the relationship between general and special education teachers, and the development of consultation and collaboration models.

The Matal system has limitations, however. First, the model is new and there is no clear empirical proof that educational outcomes are in any way improved over previous intervention models. Second, no reliable screening instruments exist yet for identifying reading and writing difficulties in Hebrew and Arabic; these are still under development. Third, no such program even exists in mathematics, sciences, or problem solving. Such limitations must be overcome for this experiment to work.

Clearly, the Israeli special education system, and specifically the provision of services to children and youth with LD is at a crossroads as the Ministry of Education attempts to circumvent longstanding cultural norms regarding separation inherent in Israeli society in order to guarantee full integration of children with LD into all aspects of the general education curriculum. This is an unusual event on the Israeli special education horizon, and only time will tell whether this experiment is successful.

**NOTES**

1. In this chapter the term does not refer to those Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories or West Bank (areas captured by Israel in the 1967 war, also known as the Six Day War) who do not hold Israeli citizenship.
2. In Israel, laws are written very succinctly. Regulations and clarifications are handed down by the ministry Director General on a monthly basis and carry the full weight of law.

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