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CHANGES IN SOCITS - SENSE OF COHERENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHING SITUATIONS

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Abstract

Special education teacher education in Israel lasts four years. The program structure is unique to Israel and has two stages: First stage - three years of teacher education. The student-teachers considered as pre-service teachers and engage in both academic studies and teaching practice. Second stage - the fourth year of studies. The student-teachers are at the same time students and   teachers. They called interns in their induction year. They differ from interns around the world that are teachers who have completed their academic studies. Special education student-teachers perceive studies, field experience and teaching in special education as stressful as a result of the combination of external pressures and personal expectations. An inner resource that can help them cope with their stressful situations in teaching is Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations (SOCITS), a resource that was found in earlier research (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2015). SOCITS includes three components: Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness in teaching situations. This research examined the changes in SOCITS and its components among 107 special education   student –teachers, from a college in Israel, in the first and fourth years of their studies. A mix-methods research approach and tools were chosen using SOCITS' questionnaire, reflective diaries and semi-structure interviews. The research revealed changes in SOCITS as a global orientation and its' components in the comparison between special education first year pre-service teachers and fourth year interns.

1. Introduction

1.1. Special education teacher education program in Israel

Special education teacher education programs reflect the complexity and multi-dimensionality of special education. In Israel, this program lasts four years. The program's structure is unique to Israel and has two stages: **First stage** - three years of teacher education. The student-teachers considered as pre-service teachers and engage in both academic studies and teaching practice. In each of their teacher education years, the pre-service teachers take a mentoring course that accompanies their practice teaching and supports their development. This process guided by a pedagogical instructor and a mentor teacher and enables them to understand the requirements of the world of teaching, the pupils and their needs. As part of their special education training program, the special education pre-service teachers specialize in learning processes for children with special needs in all educational frameworks: segregated frameworks (for those aged 6 – 21) as well as inclusive frameworks. They experience teaching diverse types of population and a different number of pupils each academic year. During their first and second years, the pre-service teachers practice teaching once a week. In the first year, they teach an individual mentally disabled pupil while in the second year they practice teaching a small group of learning disabilities pupils. During the third year, the pre-service teachers focus on practice teaching a class of pupils with behaviour disorders. **Second stage - induction year** - the fourth year of studies. According to the Israeli Ministry of Education, the student-teachers are at the same time students and teachers. They called interns in their induction year. They differ from interns around the world that are teachers who have completed their academic studies. They teach between 12 (1/3 time) weekly hours and 36 (full time) during one school year and receive wages. Interns teach pupils with special needs of all ages, in all educational frameworks. Induction year (internship year) is a stage in professional development and an organized support system by the Ministry of Education in Israel. The induction year components include support at school by personal mentoring, principal and colleague teachers. At the college or university, the support is given by the internship workshops and their leaders. The purpose of this year is to enable continuous learning and self-development via reflective practice and to help interns be absorbed in schools (Fulton et al. 2005; Strong, 2009; Schatz-Oppenheimer et. al 2011). Studies conducted in Israel revealed that interns reported great satisfaction with their experiences during the internship year: interaction with pupils, their integration into schools and the way they are treated by management. Further, interns reported satisfaction with the contribution of the internship program to their professional development (Nasser-Abu Alhija et. al, 2011; Shimoni, et al. 2006; Fisherman, 2005). This contribution is the combination of all the components of the program, mostly mentoring and the internship program.

The induction year in Israel is perceived as the peak of teacher education. It is impossible to get a teaching license without a successful completion of an induction year. The student-teacher, which receives his or her teaching license, sets off as an independent professional teacher (Raingold, 2009). The focus in the induction year shifts from training in teacher education colleges – the academic field - to the work field – the schools. The theoretical terms, which the student-teacher has learnt, such as long-term planning, assessment methods and more, are no longer theoretical terms, but rather a specific reality the teacher has to define, activate and operate in it (Levinsky College of Education, 2017).

1.2. Special education student-teachers' difficulties

Teaching has been characterized as a complex and stressful occupation by its very nature even for experienced teachers (Tuval & Or, 2008; Hillel-Lavian, 2008) and as a result, for student-teachers (pre-service teachers and interns). Being a teacher is stressful across different countries and schoolteachers are among those professionals with the highest levels of job and burnout on the job stress. It is understandable, then, that levels of psychological distress have been reported to be great among student-teachers (Wong et al., 2006 in Gardner, 2010). According to many studies, special education teachers were found to experience more stress and higher levels of burnout than general education teachers (Lazuras, 2006 and Embich, 2001 in Dickerson, 2008).

The special education student-teachers are highly motivated, and most of them have chosen special education for personal reasons and for the realization of a sense of mission. Often, they take up teaching with the intent to change the system and sometimes due to the wish to undergo a remedial experience after having experienced failure in the mainstream education system (Hillel-Lavian, 2009; Ezer, Gilat & Sagee, 2011; Aloni, 2014).

The special education pre-service teachers and the interns attending academic studies, must navigate between being "students" and "teachers", between academic tasks and their teaching requirements. This process causes difficulties. They report high level of stress with: academic performance; overload school work; challenging behaviour of learners, involvement in classroom situations and more, as the issues contributing most to their levels of stress (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007, Jacobs, 2010). The requirements of pre-service teachers include maintaining a personal and intimate relationship with their pedagogical instructor and the mentor teacher, sharing the planning of the lessons with them, and getting systematic supervision and on-site mentoring; in addition to their other responsibilities and obligations. Interns, as well as pre-service teachers, indicate similar difficulties although their experience differs from the experiences they had as pre-service teachers. The transition from the teacher education college to the new status as an intern, who is a teacher, is usually sharp. The transition occurs in the short time between the end of teacher education and the beginning of work, and psychologically, it is a giant leap (Friedman & Gavish, 2001, Glassford & Geri Salinitri, 2007). This situation requires the interns to cope with a variety of roles in school and succeed at all of them simultaneously. Furthermore, from the beginning of the school year to its end, they are expected to function professionally and abide by all rules and instructions, to perform complex tasks and assume the same responsibility as their veteran colleague (Brownell, et al. 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010 in Hudson, 2012). In addition, despite their lack of experience, principals are expecting the interns to function effectively as agents of change in the education system (Tat, 2008; Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2011).

1.3. SOCITS as a personal coping resource

The student-teachers' difficulties mentioned so far, arises the question - what personal resources will enable special education student-teachers (pre-service teachers and interns) to cope with the complex teaching situations?

One of the personal coping resources that can answer this question is the concept SOCITS which is based on previous research of the authors (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2015; Bracha & Bocos, 2015). SOCITS was defined following Antonovsky's concept - SOC (1998):

"It defines the extent to which the student-teacher has a sense of confidence in the predictable, familiar teaching situations, and the belief that one can cope so that teaching situations will be managed in the best way. SOCITS has three components: Comprehensibility: (cognitive component) the extent to which the student-teacher perceives teaching situations as cognitively meaningful and predictable. Manageability: (behavioural component) the extent to which the student-teacher perceives the available resources as satisfactory in the attempt to meet the demands placed by both external and internal stimuli in teaching situations' problems. Meaningfulness: (motivational-emotional component): the extent to which the student-teacher feels teaching situations are emotionally meaningful and that at least some of the daily requirements pose more of a challenge than a heavy burden (Bracha and Hoffenbartal, 2015, p.723)".

In a pioneer research, SOCITS was found among student-teachers as a personal coping resource (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2015). Another research, among special education pre-service teachers, revealed a primary process of development, of change of SOCITS and its' components, between first and third year of their studies (Hoffenbartal & Bocos, 2015). Regarding interns, SOCITS was found as a buffer and a predictor to interns' burnout (Bracha & Bocos, 2015).

These researches indicate that SOCITS and its components influence the student-teachers.

Since this concept is new, more researches are required to understand it and its' components among different student-teachers population; in different teacher education programs; between different teacher education years and along teachers' professional development etc.

2.   Problem Statement

SOCITS and its' components was found as a personal coping resource that influence the student-teachers. Yet, this concept is new and there is little knowledge about it and changes occurring in it. Furthermore, no comparison was conducted between the years of study (first year, fourth year) therefore; there is no knowledge about the changes in this sense.

3.   Research Questions

The research questions and hypothesis were:

A.   Does SOCITS and its' components, among special education student-teachers, change between first year and fourth year of teacher education?

The hypothesis: The level of SOCITS and its' components among special education fourth year student-teachers (interns) will be higher than the level of SOCITS and its' components among special education first year student-teachers (pre-service teachers).

B.   What are the differences in the manifestations of SOCITS, including all its components, among special education student-teachers in this research?

4. Purpose of the Study

This research will focus on the special education student-teachers and its' aim is to examine changes of special education student-teachers SOCITS' (Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations), between first year and fourth year of their studies.

5. Research Methods

In order to answer the research goal, a mixed methods approach was adopted.

5.1. The research participants

The research participants were from a college in the centre of Israel, from two groups: (1) 57 special education first year student-teachers (pre-service teachers). (2) 50 special education fourth year student-teachers (interns) (N=107).

5.2. The research tools

- ▪ SOCITS questionnaire (Hoffenbartal & Bracha, 2016).
- ▪ Reflective diaries - the special education pre-service teachers were instructed to write reflections on their teaching practice as a part of their academic duties.
- ▪ Semi-structured interviews - included two kinds of questions: one major open-ended question and focus questions regarding SOCITS and its' components. This tool was chosen because special education interns do not have to write dairies.

Both tools enabled the researchers to deeply understand the SOCITS of the participants, and changes that can occur in it.

6. Findings

The findings will be presented with regard to the research approach and tools:

(1) Analysis of SOCITS questionnaire - quantitative tool.

(2) Analysis of the participants' statements regarding SOCITS as a global concept and of each of its' components: Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness – qualitative tool.

6.1. Analysis of SOCITS questionnaire

The research question was - Does SOCITS and its' components, among special education student, teachers, change between first year and fourth year of teacher education?

The analysis yielded that the means of the global score of SOCITS and the means of the three components of SOCITS are higher among special education interns in the fourth year compared to first year special education pre-service teachers, as can be seen in figure 01:
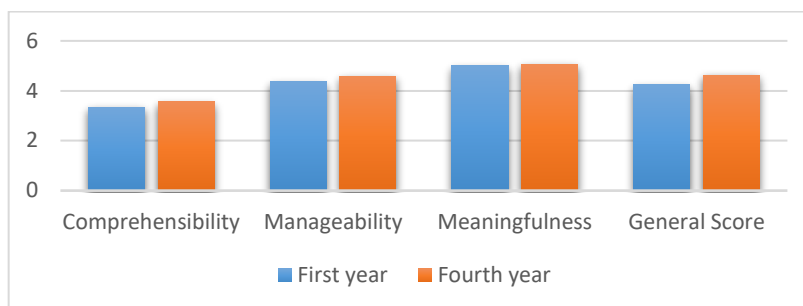
Figure 01. Means of SOCITS' grades (general and three components) by year (N=107)

The difference is statistically significant for the global score and approaches significance for manageability as can be seen in table 1:

Table 01. Means and standard deviations of SOCITS and its components by year (N=107)

	First year special education pre-service teachers (N=57)		Fourth year special education interns (N=50)			
	Means	SD	Means	SD	T test	P
Comprehensibility	3.35	1.15	3.56	1.08	0.97	NS
Manageability	4.37	0.82	4.59	0.61	1.55	.06
Meaningfulness	5.01	0.71	5.06	0.65	0.37	NS
General Score	4.24	0.74	4.62	0.45	3.15	.001

6.2. Analysis of reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews

Two approaches of content analysis were performed: Data driven approach was used for the reflective diaries of first year special education pre-service teachers. The categories that were identified emerged from the data itself, meaning - no pre-determined categories were defined. Driven thematic analysis was used for the semi-structured interview of the special education interns in the fourth year. The categories of the analysis were determined in advance regarding SOCITS and its' components. (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative results constituted another layer in the understanding of the student-teachers' SOCITS, including all its' components. The qualitative research yielded manifestations testifying to explicit differences in SOCITS and its' components between first year special education pre-service teachers and fourth year special education interns, as can be seen in table 2:

Table 02. Student-teachers' statements regarding SOCITS and its' components by year

SOCITS and its components	First year special education pre-service teachers	Fourth year special education interns
SOCITS as a general concept	"I felt a bit confused, the broad knowledge I had acquired during the year both theoretically and practically, suddenly placed me in a situation of silence and inability to confidently implement all I had learnt"	"I knew it would be hard, that it is the first year as an intern… coherence empowered me…without coherence, there is no order to things, coherence as a trait and character for a person has to be professional, too. The year is not over yet, and I hope it will have some continuation"

Comprehensibility	"I felt that my personal knowledge in the field is not sufficiently extensive"	"I quickly understood that I need to become flexible and be there to listen and contain the pupils. After that, it will come… I think I understand the role of the teacher"
Manageability	"Each day I came out with ambivalent feelings, as didactically I am highly successful, and the pupils understand what they learn, but I fail to establish warm connections with the pupils and do not feel vital in the class texture"	"I feel a lot more comfortable, I feel I can handle better the study material and the tests, the pupils' discipline, the connection to the parents, phone calls…"
Meaningfulness	"The lessons I have thought definitely made me appreciate myself more. I realized that I can do anything even if I feel insecure"	"If you look at the difficulties versus the feeling of satisfaction and meaningfulness, they are relatively trivial; the difficulties do not really have any influence. It is different. There is nothing to compare with the emotional and mental rewards"

7. Conclusion

The results of this research, that examined the changes in SOCITS and its components, pointed to a change in SOCITS among special education student- teachers, in the comparison between first year and fourth year of teacher education.

7.1. SOCITS as a global coping resource

The findings emerging from the questionnaires, personal reflective diaries and personal interviews testified to a significant change in SOCITS' level. The conclusion drawn is that SOCITS changes between the years. Thus, when the special education interns in this study will come across stressful situations in teaching, it will be clear to them that they possess the internal resource to cope with their difficulties. They will feel that they know how to choose the appropriate coping strategy and will be highly motivated to cope more than special education first year pre-service teachers will.

7.2. SOCITS' components

This research examined the change of each of SOCITS three components – Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness, in the comparison between special education first year and fourth year student-teachers.

It was found that the difference regarding the level of Manageability, of the three components, is statistically approaches significance. It can be concluded that the sense of Manageability in teaching situations changes between the years. Therefore, when the special education interns in this study will be required to cope with difficulties in classroom management, they will feel, more than the special education first year pre-service teachers, that they have the resources to meet the demands in teaching situations and manage them. In contrast to the quantitative results, the qualitative results indicated a change in each of the three components. Meaning – there are changes in the sense of Comprehensibility and Meaningfulness in

teaching situations. Thus, when the special education interns in this study will be required to cope with daily teaching situations, they will perceive these requirements as cognitively predictable and meaningful. They will treat them as a challenge more than a heavy burden.

In light of these results, a farther research in different population and along teacher professional development, will expend the understanding of the changes in SOCITS as a coping resource.

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