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Teachers Living with Contradictions: Social Representations of Inclusion, Exclusion and Stratification in Israeli Schools

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This paper describes part of an ethnographic research study that examined the Social Representations of *inclusion and stratification* within Israeli elementary schools. These concepts derive from separate theoretical sources. *Inclusion* is a central concept in educational thinking and research; *stratification* is a frequently used term in sociology. Two other closely related concepts are *exclusion*, derived from critical political research and *teachers' differential behavior*, an individual-centered concept derived from psychological approaches. The use of Social Representations Theory (SRT) enabled us to examine everyday life situations in schools through the prisms of sociological and psychological approaches combining the collective and individual, and facilitate a new perspective. The findings revealed a dichotomy in school life between inclusion and stratification. The declared school *ideology* was that of inclusion and of objection to exclusion and to stratification, whereas the daily discourse and the main school practice served the purpose of stratification. To cope with these incompatible representations, the teachers developed different kinds of camouflage strategies expressed in their school practice and daily discourse. Their strategies helped them deal with, solve or ignore the gap between these two goals without seemingly choosing one goal over another.

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In the discussion I argue that these strategies structure the teacher's world in order to reduce the discomfort arising from this incompatibility, to turn the unfamiliar to familiar and to create camouflaged reality in which they can live.

Keywords: Social Representations, inclusion, exclusion, stratification, ethnography research

> *…Everything became clear in the discussion on whether to have Asaf [a pseudonym, as are all other names in this article] repeat Grade 1 or have him enter Grade 2 together with all of his classmates. Asaf, a thin, bespectacled boy, had difficulties in learning to read, yet despite his difficulties, was dubbed "The Little Professor" by his teacher. Sandra, the Grade 1 teacher, a large, colorful woman in her 50s, could hardly conceal her affection for the boy. In March, the school's pedagogic council held a meeting on whether or not to promote Asaf to Grade 2. Sandra fought to keep him back another year, and objected to any other suggested solutions to address his poor achievements. Sandra's greatest objection was to the idea of taking him out of class to be helped by the school's special education teacher…*

The discussion exposed the dichotomous reality in which Israeli elementary school teachers operate. On one hand, teachers must include, nurture and promote the entire class; on the other hand, they are expected to stratify children according to their achievements, identify children with learning difficulties as early as possible, and exclude children with major difficulties by tracking them into special education settings. This dichotomy, the way of life in Israeli elementary schools, is based on two hegemonic representations of the school, representing two disparate goals: *inclusion* and *stratification.*

The current article describes part of an ethnographic study which applied interpretive analysis to the complex picture of the elementary school. Israeli children enter the education system at the age of six; over the years some are tracked into separate special education frameworks. The research goal was to examine the school's process and social discourse of tracking, while taking a closer look at the officials, institutions and steps creating and structuring the exclusion.The research question was: Can the school staff's social representations, reflected in their ideology, daily thinking, practice and institutions, explain the process of how and why children are tracked into a "career" in special education?

BACKGROUND: THE ISRAELI SCHOOL SYSTEM

The research was carried out in two Jewish public elementary schools in Israel. The six-year elementary school is preceded by a one-year obligatory kindergarten. Elementary classrooms average 30-35 students with one teacher (usually a woman), who teaches most of the curriculum. Approximately 10% of all Israeli students (about 156,000) are diagnosed as "children with special needs," and about one quarter are referred by a special professional committee to special education frameworks (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2010). A special in-school committee deals with those defined as "weak"[1] students but who have not been referred to the external special education system. These students receive their special education within specific small classroom frameworks dubbed *"integrative* teaching."

Theoretical Background

The principles of equality and inclusion in education were adopted by many countries at the UNESCO Salamanca Conference of 1994. These principles establish the elementary school as enabling all children, including those with "special needs," to realize their equal right to an education (Dale, 2005; Lewis & Norwich, 2005). The basic premise of equality and inclusion is that although there are many types of diversity (e.g., physical, social, emotional, cultural and linguistic differences), the education system in general and the school in particular are obligated to adapt themselves to diversity so that all children can study in the regular schools (Brusling & Pepin, 2003; Dale, 2000; Dixon, 2005; Florian, 2008; Lewis & Norwich, 2005; Stainback, Stainback & Jackson, 1992).

Inclusive education means that all students belong to school life and are capable of learning in the main educational stream (Ben-Ezra & Cohen, 1997). The engagement by so many scholars in the principle of inclusion in education reflects just how difficult the education system finds it to act accordingly, since it actually operates as a hierarchical structure which excludes some of the children and tracks them into frameworks separate from the normative system.

[1] I chose to use the term "weak student" despite the awareness that it may arouse uneasiness among education professionals who prefer the term "children with special needs." The choice of the term was based on my wish to reflect the sort of communication I encountered at the investigated schools.

Scientific disciplines, such as education, psychology and sociology, have offered a distinct set of theoretical concepts in reference to the hierarchical structure of school children's society. The most significant among these are the concepts of *inclusion*, *exclusion*, *stratification* and *diversity*, each of which derives from theories in a distinct social discipline.

Inclusion: The concept of inclusion means that the education system must respond to the educational, physical and social needs of each child, especially those with "special needs" (UNESCO, 1994). The concept was coined within the educational literature, whose goal was to investigate how children, particularly those with "special needs," are integrated within the general system (Angelides, 2005; Brusling & Pepin, 2003; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Reiter, Schanin & Tirosh, 1998; Stainback et al., 1992). The ideological foundation of this approach is a democratic, liberal, egalitarian value system, which considers human diversity a valuable contribution of each individual to the community (UNESCO, 1994). Another, seemingly similar, concept is *integration* (Heb., *shiloov*). The underlying assumption is that the system should integrate children who have already been excluded from the regular system (e.g., Dixon, 2005). In Israel, researchers have mainly evaluated projects aimed at integrating "children with special needs" within "regular" school systems and teachers' attitudes toward integration (Almog & Shechtman, 2004; Avisar, Reiter & Leyser, 2003; Leyser & Romy, 2005; Reiter et al., 1998). In recent years, the discourse on inclusion in education in the context of normalization (Reiter, 2007) and social justice (Connor & Gabel, 2010) expanded throughout the world, as well as in Israel. The emphasis was now placed on the fate of children from minority groups among those tracked into special education (e.g., Blanchette, 2006, 2010; Brantlinger, 2005). Many experts argue that despite acceptance in general of the principle of equality and inclusion in education, the goal of inclusive education was not truly achieved (Reiter, 2007).

Exclusion: The opposite of inclusion, the term "exclusion" appears in the psychological literature as segregation and differential behaviors. The assumption is that individual behavior is an indication of an internal psychological factor. Theoretical questions deriving from this approach refer, for example, to the motives underlying how specific teachers behave towards

specific students, and how it may impact students' internal processes to create difficulties such as low motivation, insecurity and low self-esteem (Babad, Inbar & Rosenthal, 1982; Mamlin & Harris, 1998). The critical social approach offers a distinctive concept of exclusion, defining it as pushing specific social groups to the margins of the hegemonic society (Oppenheim, 1998; Reid & Knight, 2006; Brantlinger, 2006; Connor & Gabel, 2010). For instance, once a child is labeled as "sick," this kind of "otherness" (Goffman, 1963) erects physical and social barriers between the child and those represented as "normal."

Stratification: This sociological concept describes how hegemonic societies construct status-related social hierarchies, and how children from low-status minorities are brought up to uphold them. Sociological theory considers stratification as the underpinning of a capitalistic value system, according to which human social diversity is organized as a status-related hierarchy excluding specific social groups from the central hegemonic social system (e.g., Bourdieu, 1993; Collins, 1979; Giroux, 1981). Within the school context, the theoretical issues concern the social organization of schools as an institution, their collective social processes (Hurn, 1993; Rist, 1970; Swirski, 1995) and the role schools play in the surrounding society (Collins, 1979; Reid & Knight, 2006).

Diversity: Within the educational literature, diversity has a number of meanings critically related to each of the concepts of inclusion, exclusion and stratification (Gordon & Nesher, 1996). Diversity as a value is constructed as a human phenomenon, a positive contribution expressing the unique nature of each individual, and, as such, needs to be nurtured. According to this approach, a society supporting diversity is a stronger and more interesting one than a homogeneous society. Thus, the school system should be organized such that each child is equally included. However, diversity quite often is also constructed as a problem. It is accepted as a given, but the system does everything in its power to eliminate - or at least diminish - diversity by creating special resources for those in need (Pasternak, 2002), thereby excluding students into social marginality. Hierarchical diversity is apparent where the school system sorts students into frameworks such as ability groups, thus replicating and conserving social stratification (Bourdieu, 1993; Giroux, 1981).

Inclusion, exclusion, stratification and diversity, as they were defined scientifically, were not, however, within the language I heard during our extensive official and non-official

involvement in the daily life of the Israeli elementary schools. The communication there, as I observed, was of its own kind. The aim, then, was to discern the underlying construction of the school reality through the discourse and activity of its school professionals. Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984) served us in achieving this goal.

Social Representations

Social representations form a symbolic system reflecting an entire range of images, values, ideologies, beliefs, ideas, concepts and scenarios, fulfilling a function of transparency and orderly arrangement of social processes and institutions (Moscovici, 1984). They restructure reality which people in groups conduct in a specific context through mutual negotiations and under the impact of a meta-social system (Doise, 1993). The outputs of the restructuring comprise ideology, speech and actions in daily life, including common sense, among other elements (Moscovici, 1984, 2000). Common Sense is popular knowledge, thinking and behavior in everyday life (Moscovici, 1989) characterized by its contextual logic; it is not illogical. Common sense knowledge is functional, serving the goals of the group by solving everyday problems and meeting needs (Moscovici, 2000; Jovchelovitch, 2008).

Social representations locate the individual and the group in relation to other groups (Duveen, 2001). Perceptions of the "other" arise out of the social representations of "those who belong" and "those who are outside the system." As Jovchelovitch (1997) has argued, "Some groups have a greater chance than others to assert their version of reality" (Jovchelovitch, 1997: 8). In the case at hand, we are referring to children included within and those excluded from the school. The group, in this case, the staff, operates to define, expose and represent those "in our team" and the "others".

Duveen and Lloyd (1993) examined how the school impacts the development of the social representations of gender in British schools, and showed how teachers' distinct representations of their students would track the students into different educational careers. Howarth (2004) described in her research the exclusion of black pupils in England, and how the system ignores their group's culture. Their narrative is not listed in the curriculum, which conveys to the children that their cultural norms do not belong to the mainstream, and that they are opposed to it and therefore rejected. She argues that by using Social Representations theory, we can begin to

decipher and thus address symbolic levels of exclusion in the education system, and identify how social representations permeate social practices at the school. Such practices may lead to marginalization and labeling pupils and cultures as "others".

Social representations are characterized as being “self-evident,” enabling them to exist as unchallenged reality. The “self-evident” consists of familiar, understood and unexamined social representations providing a feeling of security (Moscovici, 1984). These ideas have great impact; they organize our lives even if we are unaware of them. They create a frictionless, trouble-free world in which action and speech confirm acquired beliefs and interpretations to conform to tradition, and not to contradict it. This is the dynamics of familiarity, in which objects, people, and events are perceived and understood in relation to previous paradigms or encounters assisted by the images and ideas through which we perceive the “other” and the “irregular" (Tuval & Orr, 2009). What is known from the past reinforces the impression of what must be in the future. Social representations of the obvious are taken for granted, and are the issues usually presented for public discussion (Moscovici, 1984).

The pattern of the “self-evident” originates in the social representation of cause and effect in which nothing is coincidental, e.g., “No smoke without fire.” We rush to search for reasons only when something is not understood or familiar (Wagner, 1998). This representation assumes a causal relationship between phenomena. If students have not yet learned to read, we assume there is a reason for their failure. This is the way so many things are accepted as self-evident (Moscovici, 1984). These representations of attribution of causation prevent people (teachers in our case) from seeking other explanations for certain phenomena. Additional classifications of social representations are concretized or fixed representations, in contrast to consensual representations which change and represent open, dynamic communication (*ibid.*).

One of the major issues studied in SRT research is the way in which people transform the unfamiliar to the familiar. Several processes are involved in this dynamic, among them *anchoring* and *objectification* (Moscovici 1984, 1988). *Anchoring* refers to the process through which the unfamiliar is made familiar introduces the unfamiliar into the channels of the understood world. This cognitive state neutralizes the tension or the incompatibility created by the situation with its concealed unfamiliar (Moscovici, 1984, 1988). For example, I observed how a teacher immediately placed a new immigrant child who did not know any Hebrew in the group of low-

achievers. This means that when the teacher does not know how to teach a student, she labels him "weak" and seats him with children with difficulties, thus camouflaging the unfamiliar to make it familiar. The second process of transforming the world into the known is *objectification*, in which symbolic elements in the system of social representations are perceived as elements of actual concrete reality. This mechanism takes an abstract concept and transforms it into a "seemingly" concrete object, entirely assimilated among elements which we can perceive through the senses. Thus, the concrete replaces the idea (Moscovici, 1984; Jodelet, 1991). For example, in one of the staff meetings at a school where the teacher ranked students by reading skills, participants began to talk about "the first child," "the second," and "the last" in the class. This is an example of objectification by stratifying the children, taking their temporary rankings to determine their fixed place in the class hierarchy.

Social Representations Theory facilitated a new theoretical link between three social viewpoints: individual processes; collective processes; the practice of education; and the connection between them. This link facilitates the examination of concepts from the different approaches of inclusion, exclusion and stratification, as well as the link between them as reflected in the school. Through an examination of the social representations of inclusion, stratification and exclusion in schools, the current study seeks to continue the arguments by those who claim that SRT was established not only to describe and understand the production of knowledge in society, but to also create a critical social psychology to help in understand the mechanisms that create inequality and social injustice in order to bring about a social change (Moscovici, 1972; Howarth, 2004, 2006; Kessi, 2011).

METHOD

Social representations of inclusion, exclusion and stratification in the schools were examined using the ethnographic method and analyzed using Grounded Theory. The ethnographic research was conducted over three years in two urban elementary schools in Israel. The research focused on the actions and discourses of the educators in these schools, and consisted of intensive and extensive procedures. The intensive phase of the research focused on three classrooms. Once every two weeks, for three years, observations were conducted within these classes, beginning in Grade 1 and continuing until the end of Grade 3. Taped observations were conducted of

professional team meetings during these years in each of the target schools, supplemented by open-ended interviews about the target classes with their homeroom teachers, counselors, special education teachers and the principals.

The extensive phase took place in the third year of the research. Five observations were conducted in each of the Grades 4 to Grade 6 in each target school (six classes), and the homeroom teachers of these classes were interviewed as well. All observations and interviews in both research phases were transcribed. The analysis began by an inductive process, in which the entire text was screened in order to identify processes of inclusion vs. exclusion and stratification (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). It consisted of three procedures: (1) *Initial empirical categorization,* such as the repetitive indications that it is shameful to give an incorrect answer to a question posed by a teacher; (2) *second level categorization* in which the initial categories were sorted into ideologies, daily verbal expressions and activities (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Verbal expressions were extracted from what the teachers said to children in the class, to each other and to the researcher. Activities were those that teachers practiced in the classroom, and ideological representations were identified by clear overt, verbal or written declarations central to the school discourse, referring to values; and (3) *super categorization* by which the previous categories were identified as inclusion exclusion and stratification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Physically, the two schools were similar, with most of the students in both came from lower middle class backgrounds. The Grade 1 classrooms were situated on the first floor of three - storied, grey-white buildings with a large, sunlit fenced yard with scattered green bushes and trees. The yard was not well landscaped. Each home room was a bit crowded, with approximately 30 students, and the walls were aesthetically decorated with posters and learning materials.
The findings of the current study showed that the school staff operated to achieve two central objectives of inclusion and stratification, although they are incompatible. The data analysis presents a dynamic relation between the two goals, at the end of which some children are tracked into a variety of special education frameworks. The tracking is not a one-time step of failure of inclusion leading to exclusion, but a continuing process of stratification. This process tracks

various children into different special education careers, while leading other children outside of the regular school system.

I found that stratification leads eventually to the exclusion of students, an operation which is constantly in play. For example, at the first pedagogical council to discuss the Grade 2 children, stratification was implemented when the teacher described how she related to her students by dividing them into three reading groups she called "very good," "intermediate," and "weak." At the end of the year, the staff wanted to know who was unable to continue with the class and should leave for a special framework, i.e., exclusion took place. At that meeting, they discussed only the "weakest" children as marked out at the previous council. This means that the stratification process was part of the school routine, as a "self-evident" operation (Tuval & Orr, 2006). Examining the children at the lowest ranking led to exclusion and removal from the group. Because inclusion and stratification are incompatible, the school staff has been constantly operating out of contradictory social representations while attempting to resolve them. Such solutions are reflected in the schools' ideology, staff's daily actions and speech. It is important to emphasize that I did not find any overt discussion in the school of the two goals, or any discussion of their contradictory nature. While inclusion is perceived as an ideological value, stratification is perceived as "the way of the world" (Tuval & Orr, 2009).

The ideology of inclusion: In the examination of the major social representations in the ideological discourse in the school, which comprised overt oral and written declarations (such as the school credo), I found that the staff professed the ideology of inclusion while objecting to exclusion and stratification. For example, the school guidance counselor stated, *"Our students belong to us,"* or the school headmistress's declaration, "*I think that special schools of that type should not be opened, but we still have a very…traditional approach, and that's what there is."* In contrast to the stated ideology of inclusion, I found that the everyday actions and speech in the schools consisted mainly of stratification, with numerous compromises to camouflage it.

Living with compromise: "Eating one's cake and having it, too…": I found numerous compromises in the school staff's daily practice and speech to enable them to cope with the gap between the absolute theoretical social representations of inclusion as an ideal, and the numerous

actual representations of stratification in reality. Compromise intends to solve the dichotomy between two goals, or to ignore it, without obviously choosing one goal. Some compromises were common to all of the teachers; others characterized one or several schools or a few teachers; still others characterized a single teacher. The current article describes the most outstanding strategies used in the schools, which I have grouped together in several categories.

"More of the same": This category represents the idea that repetition advances learning. An example is the view that the same teaching method is good for all of the children, and that those having difficulty simply need more time, more repetition, or more lessons. The most outstanding example is reflected in the pace and methods of teaching implemented by the Grade 1 and 2 teachers with the groups with low achievement in reading, groups that were called in the schools' language "the weak groups." These groups use the exact same methods as the rest of the class, only with the number of lessons simply doubled. This strategy mainly reflects a different attitude to difference in pace. A characteristic example may be found in the lesson in which a teacher taught reading to the "weak group" while the other children worked on assignments written on the blackboard. The children and the teacher sat around a table, with the same book in front of each child, as they all read out loud as directed by the teacher. During the lesson, numerous difficulties in reading were revealed among the children. The teacher repeated four times her request to re-read the book many times. For example, she admonished Vladimir, "*How do we learn to read, Vladimir? By reading all day! How can you progress if you don't read?"* She then emphasized to all the children: *"Do you know why it's still difficult for us? Because you didn't read enough at home! You have to read lots and lots at home."* In this way, the teacher's content and behavior emphasized her perception that repetition leads to progress. During one lesson, she said to the "weak group," *"...to learn how to read and write – what do you have to do every day? ... You must devote time every day. Whoever doesn't write and read every day won't know how to."*

The strategy of "more of the same" was a compromise originating in the representation of diversity as a means of classification based on a hierarchical division, mainly according to speed. The inclusion approach to teaching, which considers children's differences to be a fact or a value, would have developed other teaching strategies for differential teaching, not as

"weaker" or "stronger" students, but as children with differing tendencies or needs. This strategy preserves surface equality between the children, because all of them are taught using the same method, but the surface also preserves a hierarchy in which the strong stay strong and the weak remain weak. It camouflages and maintains the stratification.

"The one right way": This compromise is based on the belief that there is one single correct way to accomplish schoolwork, which is the best way for all students. This approach stood out very sharply in the discussions in the education system on teaching methods for reading and mathematics which were conducted in the media as well, in seeking out the "best method" for teaching to all children: this reflects the assumption that there is only one way, which perhaps was not yet found, but a single "right way" does exist. This belief ignores the differences between students, between teachers and between cultures. According to this approach, diversity represents a problem, and is therefore negative. Such social representations divide the population into those for whom "the one right way" is suitable, i.e., the majority, and those who need "special" methods, which classifies others into the "excluded group." This strategy is reflected in choosing methods for teaching reading which are applied to the entire class, as well as to the children having difficulty in learning to read. This is how the Grade 1 teacher explained to me how she selects the reading method for the class: *"All of them learn by the 'X' method. This is the very best way, and I have vast experience in this method over many years, and it is also the Ministry of Education's method. For those who do not succeed by the middle of the school year, I change to another method…"* The remedial teacher, like the classroom teachers, describes the situation as only the child who fails in learning reading the commonly-accepted way should learn how to read using another method. If he fails using the other method as well, they will seek a third way, and so on. In these cases, diversity is perceived as a problem or a failure. The compromise of "the one best way" represents linear thinking: there is one correct way, and those who are unsuitable drop out.

"If I don't admit it's there, it's not there": This is a kind of self-delusion, camouflaging the stratification so people can believe it does not exist. As part of this strategy, teachers actually use stratification and exclusion almost without noticing it. Sometimes the staff members who

are aware of the stratifying and excluding activity are involved in camouflaging its meaning from the children, parents, colleagues and often from themselves.

One outstanding example of this approach was reflected in the Grade 1 classrooms where children were divided into regular learning groups with the teacher, according to reading level. This is stratification. The compromise was reflected in the names given to the groups: some were chosen by the children (e.g., "Smurfs," "Batman"), while others took color names or flower names, thus concealing the stratification. In one case, the coordinator of Grades 1 and 2 told me that only a few years ago, the Grade 1 groups had color names. Throughout the school, "Reds" were the strongest, "Greens" were average and "Yellows" were the weakest. Several years later, the coordinator realized that both the parents and the children understood the meaning of the hierarchical division; the teachers decided that the problem lay in the discovery, and so renamed the groups with different, random color names.

Another example is one principal's directives to teachers to formulate children's low grades with positive words (usually those who failed, from the "weakest group"):
"…as for the students whom we call 'those with special needs,' first and foremost, according to my approach, from the very beginning, even if the child is in Grade 2 through 6, and his grades are D and F, I do not allow you to write down these grades. What for? To have the child get upset? To be heartsick? What does he need this for? I require these teachers to write a self-contained verbal achievement report on the child."

This means that after the student fails on the commonly-accepted assessment scale used for most of the children, a different type of evaluation takes place. The thinking goes, that although the grade "Failure" does exist, we will not write it down "as is" in the student's report card; although stratification takes place, and another type of assessment is really not performed, what has happened is that the F is camouflaged in verbiage.

Another case of camouflage was observed at the first meeting of the pedagogic council discussing the Grade 3 students. In the presence of the principal, counselor and two classroom teachers, at the end of the argument on the atmosphere in the classroom and the assessment test conduct, the teacher said, "No, I don't call it a 'test,' I call it a 'summing up assignment.'" The camouflage consisted in calling the activities called by a new name which seemed less

stratifying on the surface, although it essentially remained stratification - in spite of the new name.

Fictive mobility: Imaginary equal opportunity: This strategy of camouflaging social classification makes it seem as if all opportunities are open, and students can change and progress from their hierarchical groups. However, in the actual existing reality, there is very little mobility, and many times it is imaginary. The compromise lies in the illusion that there is equal opportunity, that if a student shows progress he will rise through the hierarchy. However, cases I observed showed that even when a student from the lowest group demonstrated concrete progress and was transferred upward, the teacher and the rest of the staff still considered the student to be one of the lower-functioning students.

Sigal, a Grade 1 teacher, explained to me that Shlomo, an Israeli Ethiopian boy, had been transferred to a higher group from a weaker group, one week ago, on a trial basis, because she *"did not feel comfortable"* having so many boys from the Ethiopian community in the weakest group. Two weeks later, she returned him to the weakest group, stating that *"the attempt did not succeed."* Since then, he remained in the weaker group. The so-called "experiment" (having him in a higher group for a very short time, with no intentional change to help him succeed) justified the stratification, which is the compromise in this case.

A different association which represents this compromise is astonishment at the achievements by children who rose to a more advanced group – sometimes even as long as two years after the transition. It was as if they were still in their original group, and therefore the teachers were surprised at their achievements. In one case, staff at the pedagogical council at the end of Grade 2 were amazed at the strides made by Shlomit, a girl who had been in the weak class for only about one month at the very beginning of Grade 1. The school counselor stated, "*A surprising girl, amazing how she is succeeding."* The other teachers and the principal nodded in agreement.

In another case, at one of the teachers' meetings, the staff were surprised at Sarit's progress in arithmetic, but nevertheless kept her in the weak group despite her achievements. When the school counselor asked, *"What are we doing about Sarit?"* the homeroom teacher responded*, "Ahhh, Sarit…Have you seen her mark on the test, which she achieved all by*

herself, all alone. She got a 93 on the multiplication and division test of 0-100 – while sitting right next to me, with no one helping her…Today she succeeded at fractions. She surprised me…'

As the discussion progressed, no one asked or requested or appealed Sarit's placement in the weak group – and there she remained. Her progress did nothing to change her place in the hierarchy, despite everyone's astonishment, and Sarit was required to show that she had not cheated on the test. So mobility in the classroom was only a theoretical possibility.

The repeated astonishment at the achievements of children in the weak groups or those who rose from the weak groups can be explained by many earlier studies which showed almost no mobility from the weaker groups in the elementary schools (Mackler, 1969; Rist, 1970; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992), as D'Alessio (1990) showed in her studies of the social representations of childhood. She found that actual experience is only one element in the representations of childhood, with minimal impact on the overall representations of "ability" at this age. Here, too, despite their progress, children continued to be perceived as weak; achievements aroused amazement and surprise, without changing the basic perception of the child as "weak." It seems that the staff is aware of the need for mobility as part of the inclusion perception, so that the strategy of imaginary mobility assisted them in what was found in earlier studies – a lack of concrete mobility to remain fixed permanently at the bottom rung.

The "lesser evil" alternative: The compromise I have called "the lesser evil" reflects the negative perception of exclusion as a "greater evil." Thus, the staff seeks "a lesser evil" with which they can live in peace, which would create a milder incompatibility. Having a child repeat a year in the same school is one reflection of this strategy. This is what happened in the story I described in the opening section, in which the school pedagogical council held at the end of Grade 1 discussed candidates for the special education track. Only Asaf "was left behind." The teacher explained that "different" children differ mainly in their pace, which is temporary. For the teacher, having the child repeat a year is more inclusive than tracking him into special education. We cannot ignore the fact that he has been removed from his class, but the "greater evil" would have been transferring him to special education, perceived as the more obvious exclusion.

Repeating Grade 1 is perceived as "the lesser of two evils." Observed discussions in many such meetings at the end of the first year of school demonstrated this approach.

"I can't help it" – "There's nothing else I can do": Objectification of the students' problems and teachers' own capacities can become the justification for stratification, since the teacher feels that there is no other choice but to stratify the class. The concept of *capability* is a major representation in coping with the dichotomy (Tuval & Orr, 2009) in which stratification is presented as a necessity. This means that the representation of "capability" in the official and informal school discourse is when the child in Grade 1 does not succeed in reading (or in higher grades if the child does not succeed in completing other classroom tasks, such as in math) the staff uses the concept of capabilities, stating, "*he has no capabilities,"* or, *"it's a problem of capability."* When the staff has no idea of how to handle a child with learning difficulties, they talk about the child's "capability" so they can transform the concept into a seemingly real, concrete and clear-cut situation. This is objectification (Moscovici, 1984; Jodelet, 1991) of the difficulties of learning and teaching. The concept of "capability" embodies a perception of individual inborn traits as unchangeable, to solve the incompatibility between inclusion and stratification, arguing that the teacher cannot do a thing about it. This is an external attribution to the teacher (Moscovici, 1984; Wagner, 1998), i.e., if there is a problem of capability, it means that the child must study with a remedial teacher.

The concept of the "learning disability", which the staff usually shortens to "disability," embodies the idea that the problem cannot be changed. Consequently, if a child is classified as a "student with a learning disability," the staff knows what to do: refer the child to a special education teacher. In stratification thinking, problems are ranked in a hierarchy, with "lacks capability" more serious than "disability." These social representations invite the strategy of "nothing I can do about it" since they seem to constitute an external criterion for a system located within the student. The regular classroom teacher "cannot do a thing" because the student's situation is seen as permanent and unchanging, independent of the staff and its actions. Restructuring this strategy was accomplished by using words from other words of content, especially from medicine, health or illness. The teachers can thus camouflage or justify the

exclusion, since it belongs to a sphere outside of their expertise, which is why "they have no choice", but to stratify and exclude.

Thus, for example, the pedagogic council described a child in terms of having "a health problem, or medications…" The use of medical concepts anchors the references in another sphere of knowledge, classifying children into healthy and sick children and types of illnesses, which is beyond the regular classroom teachers' expertise. Medical terminology helps the teachers classify the children without experiencing this as contradicting their ideology of inclusion. For example, a Grade 4 teacher speaks about a student: *"Now about this girl with learning disabilities, we can help her continue to progress, but the disability will remain. It's not something we can treat in one fell swoop, like putting salve on it and it's gone…"* The statement contains two representations, one referring to a learning disability as being like illness, while the second represents the disability as immutable.

The process is similar to social representations of illness found in studies of various cultures (Mehan, 1996; Reiter & David, 1996) which frequently consider people with disabilities as ill. One outstanding example is the school's use of "disability" instead of "learning disability," framing it as a physiological limitation, transposing the representation to the hierarchical world of medicine. As Reiter et al. (1997; Reiter & Metzer, 2011) argues the medical world is hierarchical by its very nature, which is why the patient has no status whatsoever, but is expected to be passive and grateful. The use of a medical concept essentially leads to the stratification of students.

"Sugar-coating the bitter pill": The oxymoron: This strategy links two polar opposites. Unpleasant sensations aroused by stratification and exclusion are neutralized through a compromise, because they were incompatible with the school's stated ideology. But the results of this compromise lead to stratification. One example is the schools' use of names to camouflage the goal of tracking the weaker groups making it seem as if the very opposite is true: the special education classroom is called the *"Challenge Center." "The Integrated Classroom"* is another sign featured on the door of the special education teacher's room. Although the word integration means returning children to be mainstreamed in the regular classroom, the *"integrated*

classroom" takes children out of their class to teach them separately. These names are being used to disguise the reality.

Many scholars studying language used to refer to disabilities, limitations and difficulties among schoolchildren (Gustavsson, 1996; Oliver, 1996; Reiter & David, 1996) have pointed out that it is language which creates and restructures reality. For example, the attribution "disabled" creates a different reality than if we say "a person with a disability" (Gustavsson, 1996). A further example is teachers' use of the plural "we" at school to refer to children experiencing difficulties. This is language representing solidarity and the experience of partnership, which camouflages the difficulties. In staff discussions and in the interviews I held, I found this word used numerous times. In working with "normative" children, the classroom teachers described the work in the singular, "*I did such and such*…" but when talking about teaching the "weaker" children and "those with learning difficulties," they used the plural, "we." It seems that the "we" expressed the transfer of responsibility from personal to collective responsibility. The "partnership" helps them cope with their unsuccessful teaching experience and with the incompatibility of the goals of inclusion existing in the stratification and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The current article describes how teachers in the Israeli elementary schools operate within an existing world based on the social representations of the society in which they live. In this reality, the school staff reconstructs the world with the aid of two incompatible social representations of stratification and inclusion. (Exclusion, the additional social representation discussed in this article, is part of both of those representations, as the opposite of inclusion and the result of stratification). These social representations structure the teachers' world so the feeling of discomfort caused by the incompatibility will be reduced. The range of compromise strategies are structured with anchoring, objectification and attribution. In this way, the staff restructures the world, transforms the unfamiliar to the familiar and lessens risks. For example, any reference to parents at pedagogical meetings is in the context of children with difficulties. Perhaps their reason is that the family model is known, and explains the children's lack of success, based on removing responsibility from the school staff. This is anchoring (Moscovici, 1984) whose function is to change the unknown (the reasons for the difficulties in inculcating reading skills)

into the known (their upbringing or family situation), while maintaining the traditional teaching methods (the familiar) unchanged. It seems that when a child has difficulty in learning to read, the school staff attributes the problems to an external factor and not to itself, through representations of attribution, reflected in statements such as, "*This child has difficulty in learning to read, which means that…something is not as it should be in the family / the mother isn't cooperating/ the brother was like this, too…"and* the like. The concepts of *capability* and *learning disability* are external representations for the teacher or the staff, used to describe fixed inborn traits; in this way, the staff can attribute external representations to them. They can then avoid seeking a controllable factor to motivate change.

Because the teachers move between two incompatible goals, they operate constantly within a reality bound to fail, in which they cannot succeed simultaneously in both. The social representations of inclusion and stratification in the school make it impossible to have the ideology of inclusion sit well with the stratification actions. This incompatibility is solved with the aid of a system of social representations neutralizing any threat to their professionalism, as they create a camouflaged reality in which they can function. The representation of *inclusion* is the school staff's ideology - the desirable, ideal state - while the representation of *stratification* is what they see as reality, the nature of the world, the 'self-evident' (Tuval & Orr, 2009). The staff therefore experiences this state as a compromise between their ideology of inclusion and their reality of stratification.

To sum up, this article has attempted to contribute to the way in which social representations theory can describe and present a critical mirror that poses serious questions about social inequality and injustice. The contribution made by this research could expose the social representations that prevent children's social mobility and determines their educational career once they enter the school system. A critical perspective might also help to create change, first for those children and perhaps it might also change the impossible reality within which their teachers work.

AFTERWORD

The sequel to the story of Asaf presented at the beginning of this article, demonstrates the results of living in two contradictory worlds: a world with an ideology of *inclusion*, and with a reality of

stratification. In the end, Asaf did indeed repeat Grade 1, and was not taken then for special education placement. But when he entered Grade 2, it was decided to assign a remedial teacher to him for several weekly hours of individual instruction within the school, a partial removal of the child from the normative educational framework to the special education track which continued throughout his studies in the elementary school.

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