The Inclusive University:

Making Academic Studies accessible for Adults with

Learning and Adjustment Disabilities

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2015

Adults with learning and adjustment disabilities, which are often accompanied with relatively low intelligence, face many challenges in their everyday lives. In addition to a broad range of learning difficulties, many also cope with limited abilities in social understanding and self-management. Those whose learning disabilities are accompanied by ADHD also have difficulties with attention, concentration, self-control, and sensory regulation, and are frequently hyperactive. These difficulties are liable to arouse responses and criticism from the formal and informal environment.

The interactions between children and the various environments with which they come into contact have emotional repercussions that are liable to be extremely significant during adolescence. At this time children are expected to formulate a separate and discernible personality of a competent person who is willing and able to take on the challenges of an adult. When they reach adulthood many have difficulty completing the processes of becoming independent and separated of their parents, finding a career and choosing a profession, creating stable relationships with a partner, and establishing an identity. Shinefeld (1981) stated that it is crucial that these four dimensions be fulfilled for a person to make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The life of an adult with a learning, functional or adjustment disability can be termed "continuous adolescence." These people undergo a constant journey of forming an identity, finding their destiny in life, and assuming full responsibility for managing

their own lives (Hozmi, 2009). Many of these adults describe their lives as "falling between the cracks" and struggling with issues of social belonging.

Many adults with learning, adaptive, or functional disabilities experience frustration resulting from expectations on the part of their families, which are incompatible with their abilities. The success of their siblings in various areas of life often arouse a sense of being different or flawed as well as jealousy and frustration. This is especially true if the adult with learning, adjustment, and functional disabilities is the oldest child. Biller (1985) found that adults with learning disabilities demonstrate low levels of maturity, self-esteem, ability to acquire information, planning, career ambitions, and self-direction, and are characterized by an external locus of control. All these factors have repercussions upon self-image and internal language of adults with learning, adjustment, and functional disabilities; a language that is often based upon cognitive distortions and negative inhibitive thought patterns (Chesner, 2005).

In summary, complex learning disabilities accompanied by difficulties in adjustment have repercussions upon the cognitive, emotional, and functional aspects of a person's life.

The initiative for establishing the "Inclusive University" program began at the Trump Institute at Beit Issie Shapiro approximately 13 years ago. Its objective was to provide an answer to the emotional needs of these adults and offer them a corrective experience through studying in an academic institution with a group of peers. Humanistic theories emphasize people's ambition for self-fulfillment, accomplishment, and existential meaning (Frankel, 1981). Learning, orientation, and knowledge are important ways of attaining independent function as well as basic keys to a happy and satisfying life, regardless of a person's level of intelligence (Reiss, 2000). This article describes the development of the Inclusive University, its objectives, and characteristics.

The Objectives and Rationale of the Program

- Offering an equal opportunity for people with significant learning difficulties to acquire a higher education within an academic framework
- Extending the continuity of the "small classroom" that exists in the educational system to include academic institutions

- Enabling students who "fall between the cracks" to find a suitable framework for study, enrichment, professional training, and personal growth
- Initiating integration on various levels between students in the program and students studying in regular degree programs

Ness (1989) claimed that many students with learning disabilities assume that they will be unable to acquire a higher education after secondary school. Success or failure are not dimensions that depend solely upon the student. Harris, Rosenthal, & Snodgrass (1986) claimed that studies reveal that teachers' expectations of their students have significant impact upon their academic achievements.   Feedback discussions with graduates of the "Inclusive University" who studied in a regular educational framework revealed that their teachers had relatively low expectations regarding their success.   People who cope with adjustment disabilities, below-average intelligence and learning disabilities have difficulty being accepted to university degree programs or studies towards a diploma. It is difficult for them to cope with the acceptance requirements, and these frameworks do not offer programs and tracks that are adapted to their needs.

Description of the Program

The International Trump Institute for Continuing Education in Developmental Disabilities is the Academic Department at Beit Issie Shapiro, Israel. Since 2003 the institute has offered academic study programs suitable for persons with learning and adjustment disabilities with moderate-low intelligence. The program is based upon the idea of continuing the "small classroom" framework that exists in elementary and junior high school and in some 9th and 10th grade secondary schools. 10th and 11th – grade students receive individual supports. The study program is based upon academic learning materials that are taught in a simplified language and an accessible way.

The core course in the Inclusive University is called "The Art of Living – Introduction to Practical Psychology". The syllabus of this two-year course were constructed over several years through dialogue with students in the program and includes selected issues in psychology: understanding learning disabilities, tools for measuring intelligence and learning abilities,   the existential approach, understanding Man

according to the systems approach, forms of intelligence, normal and delayed development, introduction to mental health and the emotional world, self-image, body image, issues in communication, decision-making processes, crisis factors in the light of cognitive approaches, the Behavioral approach, Gestalt Theory, positive psychology, and introduction to research methods.

Each group consists of approximately 18 students who fulfilled the acceptance requirements and completed a personal interview. The acceptance requirements include ability to read and write (even with difficulty), ability to function independently (able to function in a framework without supervision) and holding a diploma from a previous educational framework. The intention is to map each candidate's strengths together with their difficulties. In certain cases candidates are asked to provide a psycho-educational diagnosis in order to assess the adaptations that are essential to them for optimal study.

Since its establishment more than 1,590 students have studied within the framework of the Inclusive University as of 2016.

The courses take place in a "learning group" format. This is a psycho-educational group that enables emotional processing and acquiring important tools and skills alongside acquisition of knowledge. Brown (2011) refers to psycho-educational groups as "hybrids" – groups that combine classroom learning with a therapy group and focus upon cognition followed by emotions and activities.

Determining Teaching Methods

The teaching methods in the course were outlined together with the students based on insights that result from previous positive and negative interactions with educators. Each course in the Inclusive University begins with a retrospective discussion in which students are asked to describe the best and the worst teacher they have ever studied with. The profile of the ideal teacher was constructed using the students' positive and negative descriptions of their former teachers. The main points of the descriptions of hundreds of students are listed in the following table.

Table 1: Students' Descriptions of the Traits of Good and Poor Teachers

	Good Teachers	Poor Teachers
Personal Characteristics	"Smiling, sympathetic, patient, knows how to listen," "Radiates positive energy, - caring and has love for the profession and for us", "A teacher that is first and foremost a human being" "An advisor and counselor – a paternal figure", "Supportive, retains eye contact and talks at eye level", "A teacher who projects a sense of mission", "Pleasant tone of speech"	"Judgmental", "Alienating", "Sour-faced", "Blocking", "Deterring", "Extinguished and lacks life", "Scary and strict", "impervious and unreceptive"
Pedagogical Characteristics	"Spoke at a rate that I could understand without racing or making me fall asleep," "Offers positive reinforcement," "Tells a variety of stories and explains why things are important in life," "Tells jokes", "Invests effort outside the lesson", "Reviews the previous lesson at the beginning of each lesson", "Teaches me learning strategies", "Shows understanding at mistakes", "Gives examples", "Offers tools for living"	"Does not know how to explain the material", "Talks quickly", "Punishes instead of understanding", "Gives surprise tests", "Fills up the board quickly", "Gives failing test grades", "Tells me to be quiet when he can't answer my questions", "Continues teaching during recess", "Is not creative in teaching"
Perception of Students	"Identified my potential and believed in my abilities and helped me discover what makes me special", "Adopted me and didn't give up on me", "Identified my difficulties and tried to help", "Took an interest in how I was doing – I knew that I was dealing with someone who liked me and was not my enemy, even if I didn't know anything about mathematics, I was doing my best for him", "He knew how to pick me up when I fell down."	"Extremist, thinks about students in terms of black and white", "Didn't care about me, labeled me as problematic and sent me to a lower class to prepare lessons", "Didn't accept me or my difficulties", "Excluded me and sent me from the classroom"

Relating to me among my peers	"Saw to it that the class relate to me nicely", "Instills values and not just teaches", "Sensitive to situations", "Gives me a sense that I also have something to give"	"Ignored me when I raised my hand and belittled me in front of everyone if I made a mistake", "Called me to the board in front of everyone, gave me problems to solve, and became angry when I didn't succeed", "Discriminated between me and the good students", "Degraded me"

Principles of Work Within the Program

The following work principles were adapted with the objective of providing students with the optimal corrective learning experience. These principles where crystalized on the basis of the students' formation of the "good teacher" profile.

1. All lecturers in the inclusive university programs have previous knowledge or experience working with people who are coping with learning and adjustment disabilities, and are obligated to adapt their teaching methods to suit the various learning styles of the students. Heiman and Precel (2003) view this as an important condition for creating a containing learning environment and reducing feelings of anxiety that students experience.

2. Using academic materials derived from various university departments and choosing study topics that suit the students' needs as expressed in the acceptance interviews.

3. Focusing on content that arouses motivation to learn and including topics that were presented by candidates for the course as being important to them. Kluth, Straut & Biklen (2003) noted that allowing the students to help define their study program is an important component in academic accessibility and increases motivation to learn.

4. Perceiving the learning process and its contents as empowering and as a means of improving quality of life.

5. Making the learning process enjoyable by attempting to transform it into a corrective experience. This is done by use of humor and other means of decreasing students' anxiety. For example, since many of the students have difficulty reading, writing, and summarizing, a printed summary is distributed at the end of each lesson. The rate of instruction is adapted to the students' ability to keep up and absorb the material.

6. Teaching academic-practical knowledge – A theoretical model is presented at each meeting, followed by a discussion of the students' emotional experiences relating to the model. The model is used for deriving tools for daily function.

7. Encouraging open communication during the meetings and personally accompanying each student throughout the course

8. Focusing on each student's positive abilities together with awareness of their difficulties and working on accepting them

9. Directing past failures towards learning and development and offering legitimacy for mistakes

10. All students are given identical assignments, while allowing flexibility in the form in which they are submitted. Students' various disabilities are taken into consideration. For example, students who are dysgraphic are allowed to submit an audio recording of their assignment. Grades are given in the form of comments rather than quantitative grades in order to decrease anxiety and encourage motivation to learn without arousing social comparison based upon grades.

11. The content of each session is reviewed and practiced since many students have difficulty remembering material.

12. Promoting an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and appreciation among members in the group and in their relationships with the faculty.

13. Using a variety of demonstrative teaching techniques such as audio-visual aids, hands-on experience, and assistive technology in order to help the students overcome concentration difficulties.

14. Holding integrative meetings with degree university students during some of the sessions based upon topics that are of interest to both groups.

15. The learning group members are treated as regular university students. Student organizations on the various university campuses accept Inclusive

University students as part of the student body and issue them student ID cards.

16. Personal contact with each student is retained after course hours through written communication and personal discussions. This helps to connect what occurs in the classroom with real life.

17. Expectations are implanted among the participants to continue learning and developing - even when the course is over. Many students begin additional study programs for enrichment or professional training after participating in the Inclusive University program. A few study towards an academic degree.

18. Meetings are culturally adapted to suit various ethnic groups

Evaluating the Program

62 graduates participated in an evaluation study that was conducted from 2006-2009 (Hozmi, 2009). The graduates were asked to evaluate the changes they experienced in various dimensions of their lives as a result of the course. The evaluation questionnaire used a Likert scale from 1-5, with 1 - insignificant change to 5 - extremely significant change. The results of the study are presented in the following table.

Table 2: Results of the Evaluation Research Based upon Students' Responses to the Questionnaire

	Item	Average
1	The course was a pleasant experience for me.	4.78
2	The course was interesting and enriching.	4.69
3	I'm proud of my achievements in the course.	4.57
4	The course helped me cope with my daily life.	4.35
5	I have undergone positive changes in my life since the course.	4.15
6	The course helped me fulfill my personal plans and dreams.	3.80
7	I understand myself better after the course.	4.45
8	I'm more aware of my abilities and strengths.	4.45
9	I'm less occupied with my difficulties.	3.91
10	I believe that failures are a good school for living.	4.21
11	The course helped me develop my independence.	4.27

12	I felt that the lecturers tried to explain the material clearly.	4.27
13	The topics of the course were relevant to me.	4.51
14	I believe in my ability to learn and advance after the course.	4.55
15	I'm interested in continuing studies in similar programs.	4.51

The findings from the evaluation show that the students felt the course was an interesting and enriching experience to an extremely significant degree. All their responses were rated "Extremely Significant" with the exception of items 6 and 9. Based upon their responses it appears that the course topics were relevant and empowering for the students and that they are aware of their difficulties and abilities, developed insights, believe in their ability to learn, and are even interested in participating in continued educational programs.

It appears, however, that they still have difficulty fulfilling their personal dreams and are still occupied with their personal difficulties that stem from their special needs. During an open discussion they explained that they indeed underwent a change, but the attitude of people in the environment such as parents and counselors remained unchanged.

Several qualitative questions were added to the quantitative evaluation questionnaire. Analysis of the qualitative feedback reveals four central themes that the respondents addressed:

1. **Increased self-value and experiencing empowerme**nt: Many graduates reported a positive change in their self – value. Z.P. noted that: "The course increased my self – confidence. I learned to be assertive and to put aside passivity." D.H. noted, "I feel that people see me differently and I now dare to give more of myself." K.A. stated, "I'm more confident about my body and I don't hide my injured hand anymore."

2. **Developing a positive approach to life** – F.T. summarized this saying: "I learned to find a middle point in life and to compromise." A.T. added that he developed insights from the course. "I learned that what is difficult is still possible."

3. **Making decisions regarding transitions** – R.S. explained that she had decided to move to a supportive living framework and that she was completely

sure about her choice. A.S. noted that she had decided to change her place of work.

4. **Motivation to continue studying** – 92% of the respondents reported that they were interested in continuing their studies in the Inclusive University. The open feedback reveals that many graduates are eager to expand their knowledge in various areas of life. M.A. described this clearly "People look at me differently now. I'm going to continue studying. The important thing is that I have more and more knowledge." M.Y. noted that she had been hesitant to take a professional training course offered by the National Insurance Institute, but after completing the course she decided to try to learn a profession.

The findings from the program's evaluation reveal that students were truly connected to the content of the course in an exceptional way. The content constituted a journey to the recesses of the mind. They learn to identify the strengths within themselves, and most challenge themselves to construct a strategy to utilize them. In addition, they learned that they were not responsible for the disability that limits their daily function, but they were definitely responsible for the manner in which they choose to live with it.

Conclusions and their Application

The program was extended in several areas as a result of the evaluation findings:

1. Offering Continued Programs for Enrichment and Growth - A department for continued studies was established to offer continued programs for graduates of "The Art of Living". The department offers courses in a wide variety of topics such as Introduction to Life Coaching, Building Intimate Relations, an Introduction to Animal-assisted therapy, The Mind, Cognition, and Quality of Life, Introduction to Mind Science, The Connection between Body and Soul, Mindfulness, and other topics. Many of these topics were included to accommodate students' needs and interests.

2. Conducting Seminars and Lectures for Parents and Service providers - Evening seminars are held for parents to assimilate the changes that the students experience. The objectives are to echo the voices of the students

within these forums and to develop an empathetic approach to their emotional world and increase awareness of their essential needs.

3. Developing Adapted Professional Training Programs – The Inclusive University cooperates with the "From Rupin to a Career" Program at the Rupin Technological Institute. This program is directed towards a professional diploma and adapted for adults with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. The program is based upon three principles: empowerment and emotional processing, obtaining learning strategies, and learning a profession in a variety of areas. Students requested help in acquiring a professional identity, enabling them to work in occupations that are suited to their abilities and personal interests. As a result, the Inclusive University Program was extended to include professional training.

4. Extending Courses to the Jewish Orthodox Sector: Study programs that are adapted to the religious sector have been offered for the past seven years based upon the course "The Art of Living." These courses include Introduction to Practical Psychology, and "Partnership and Cooperation – The Foundation of the Jewish Home."

5. A Scientific Research Group was established with graduates of the "Art of Living" course. Members of the group conduct research in the field of learning disabilities about issues that interest them, using a model of "Participatory Action Research" (Roth, & Hozmi, 2014). The research results are integrated within the various study programs in the Trump Institute in general and in the Inclusive University in particular. These academic works are also published in scientific journals and are presented at professional conferences. Research projects have included topics such as Social Acceptance and Rejection Among Adults with Learning Disabilities, Characteristics of a Friendly Employer, The Connection between Self-Image and Locus of Control and the Ability of Adults with Complex Learning Disabilities to Pursue and Retain Intimate Relationships, The Connection Between Functional Independence and Self – Image among Adults with Learning Disabilities.

6. Developing the "Academic Friending" Program with the Israel Unlimited organization. This program enables a full academic inclusion .In each course 12 Students who study for an academic degree, share one academic course

with 12 students of the inclusive university. The direct encounter between these two sub-groups is designed to change attitudes and eliminate labeling and prejudices between people with disabilities and those who view themselves as "normal".

7. The core course "The Art of Living" has been adapted into simplified language for adults with mild intellectual disabilities in several academic institutes.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to increase understanding of the emotional repercussions of learning, adjustment, and functional disabilities upon people's emotional world. The article focused upon the "Inclusive University" program as a tool for empowerment and enrichment.

In his book "The Art of Loving" Fromm (2001) stated that love is an essential motivating force, and emphasized that a person who does not love himself will have difficulty loving others. The Inclusive University program is designed to channel the learning experience into self-acceptance, self-love, and understanding one's disabilities, and primarily focuses upon retaining empowerment and building a personal vision suitable to one's abilities.

The experience of learning among a group of equals enables mutual learning, growth, and, primarily, transmitting essential information, that often results in significant changes in the students' lives. Studying with students who live in assisted living frameworks helps decrease anxiety for those who are hesitant to consider such an option.

Many students who were previously integrated into the mainstream educational system in elementary and secondary school feel anxious to be part of the inclusive university learning community. The process that they experience along the various courses assists them in making choices based on their individual abilities and visions rather than on the societal expectations.

Yehudah, a graduate of the program, spoke at the graduation ceremony and summarized the course: "I learned to stop thinking about life in terms of black and white. I learned that in order to succeed in life I need to dream like in the story of Jacob's ladder in which "A ladder stretched from the earth to the sky." Dreams can reach the sky if they are rooted to the ground and to reality – to my abilities. I learned

that the ladder that extends from the earth to a dream has rungs, and that I have to define my goal when I reach each rung. I learned about the importance of the word "process". I learned that living is an art and that in my life I'm the artist."

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