ENHANCING SELF EFFICACY AND GRIT: HOW EDUCATIONAL TEAMS CAN PROMOTE INNER STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The general aim of the study was to examine narratives of occupationally successful adults with childhood disabilities. This paper will focus on the contributions of educational teams inside the educational system and those in the community to their self-efficacy and grit.

The present study examined self-efficacy and grit as a gradually developing trait that helps individuals cope with the challenges imposed by disability from childhood and its social during their school years.

This paper will focus on the importance of educational teams to the development of grit and self-efficacy of students with disabilities inclusive settings.

Research question: Based on retrospective narratives of occupationally successful people with disabilities, what are the contributions of educational teams that supported the development of grit and SOSE during their school years?

Methodology: Participants were 18 adults with disabilities from childhood, who have made significant occupational attainments, in various domains. We used an in-depth, narrative interview, and a brief questionnaire including some demographic information. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

Results suggested that efficacy enhancing messages and support from educational teams, combined with educational accommodations, helped students with disabilities persevere despite various social and academic challenges.

The results will be discussed in light of the importance of efficacy enhancing messages, belief in the students with disabilities capability of overcoming their challenges, accommodations and additional supports.

Keywords: Self efficacy, grit, inclusion, disabilities, educational team.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been an increasing influence of positive psychology as well as progress in legislation and inclusion on people with disabilities' lives [e.g., 1]. These advances have gradually helped shift from a medical, pathological model to a humanistic-social model of disability. A careful examination of the literature on narratives of adults with disabilities revealed that research on the factors and processes contributing to the success and self-efficacy and grit of people with disabilities from their perspective is scarce. It is hard to define success as it is both subjective and is heavily influenced by socio-cultural norms. The present study defined success as occupational success. It was important for us to learn what can enhance the chances for occupational success for people with disabilities, and especially how they perceived their schooling experience. Particularly, we were interested to learn how their experiences with educational figures shaped the development of their grit and sense of self-efficacy. Our purpose was to derive from their experiences implications for teacher training and current inclusive education practices for students with disabilities.

The study’s theoretical framework was based on positive psychology, which focuses on the individual’s strengths and successful experiences in coping with life’s challenges and attaining emotional states of happiness, wellness, and satisfaction. Positive psychology emphasizes positive emotions, strengths, inner resources, personal skills, and other positive traits [2]. Enhancing these resources could prevent psychopathological development and help individuals develop internal resources such as self-efficacy and grit [3] that could enable them to become successful [4], especially when coping with disability from childhood. These resources can be divided into personal, internal resources and social, external resources. The term resources encompasses all the skills, traits,
abilities, and available means that exist to help the individual cope with internal as well as external stress (e.g., family, school, and community) [5].

The present study examined life stories of adults with various significant childhood disabilities such as deafness, ASD, blindness, motor disability, learning disorders, etc., who achieved significant occupational success. Even though the present study found additional sources that influenced the development of grit and sense of self-efficacy of the participants as they grew up, this paper focuses on findings relating to the influence of the educational system (pre-K–12) on these domains.

1.1 Defining Success

Success could have very different meanings in various domains and contexts: Success in one’s career may be very different from success in family life or academics. In addition, success can have very different meanings during different times in life or for different social classes and cultures. Different cultures may emphasize different aspects of success, such as doing well in academics or in sports [e.g., 6]. The definition of success should be examined both from the perspective of individuals and that of the society and culture in which they live. It is important to note that there is no consensus regarding the scientific definition of success, and various disciplines define parameters of success or how to evaluate them very differently [e.g., 7]. Personal definitions of success may be influenced by gender [9] and by class and cultural background [e.g., 10].

Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg [8] examined success stories of adults with learning disabilities, based on a definition of occupational success which included income level, educational level, occupational success, job satisfaction, and professional status classification. In this study we used a modified version of their definition of occupational success.

1.1.1 Success among People with Disabilities

The term disability encompasses a wide variety of ways in which people interact with the world through their sense and cognition. We could like to emphasize that people with the same medical diagnosis may define very differently the extent to which their disability defines them and how their disability is manifested in certain contexts [11, 12]. In addition, a person’s disability only one of several social personalities a person may have [13].

The elusive criteria for success usually refer to and are evaluated by the dominant culture in each society and usually apply to nondisabled people. Should the same criteria apply to people with disabilities? Or, perhaps, should society set up different criteria when evaluating to the success of people with disabilities? Yet again, perhaps it is best for people with disabilities define success on their own terms.

Examining the literature on success of people with disabilities raises several issues; most of them refer to the success of changing societal attitudes or organizations toward the inclusion of people with disabilities, or to the success of their rehabilitation [e.g., 14]. However, in recent years some studies have examined various aspects of success among adults with disabilities, especially success in higher education among students with learning disabilities [e.g., 15]. There is still a lack of empirical research about success stories of adults with a more diverse range of disabilities, and about how their schooling experiences helped shape their coping and attainments as adults.

1.2 Sources of Success at School

The current study focuses on the role of the educational system and educational figures outside the formal educational system in supporting students with disabilities.

1.2.1 Social support.

Social support is defined as the individual’s perception of receiving love and care by others, as producing a sense of value from others, and as a sense of being part of a social network of support and mutual commitment [16]. Social support provides the individual with various types of information, helps in developing social connections, and transmits a sense of care [17]. It contributes to the individual’s health, quality of life, and well-being [18]. Social relations and social support can positively affect the experiences of students, especially those at risk [19, 20].
1.2.2 Educational supports and accommodations.

Supports for students with disabilities is crucial for their successful inclusion. Such supports include teacher training and student-teacher interactions, curricular and extracurricular adaptations (including teaching strategies), and academic supports by a collaborative educational team [21,22].

1.2.3 Sense of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is an individual’s is the extent to which people feel that they can successfully cope with new or challenging tasks to achieve their goals [23]. Therefore, self-efficacy is one of the main conditions needed to attain success. For a certain behavior to occur, the individual must believe in his ability to successfully perform the tasks. That belief influences his ability to cope with challenges as they arise while performing that behavior. The development of self-efficacy is a significant component in a person’s motivation to reach goals [24]. Self-efficacy was correlated with achieving desirable attainments [25]. Self-efficacy is measured in relation to a task, a role, or a profession. People with a high sense of self-efficacy will set up personal challenges and will continue to cope despite repeated failure, and they will approach intimidating tasks in a relaxed manner. In addition, people who believe that ability can be developed will choose to actively cope with the task ahead [26].

It should be borne in mind that self-efficacy per se is not sufficient for achieving desirable results if not accompanied by the skills and abilities required for completing the task. In addition, the development of a personal sense of self-efficacy during childhood and adolescence is highly important in the individual’s adult life [24].

1.2.4 Sense of self-efficacy of students with disabilities in the educational system.

School success is a challenge for many students, particularly students with disabilities. In part, this can be attributed to the students' level of self-efficacy [27], although others factors may influence their success and achievements. Studies investigating students in elementary and high school suggest that many students with disabilities exhibit a low sense of self-efficacy during their school years, although the impact of learning disabilities on self-efficacy may be indirect [e.g., 28].

1.2.5 Grit

Grit is another trait that helps an individual to cope with challenges, and relates to self-efficacy. Duckworth [29] defines grit as a personality trait, which combines long-term perseverance as well as passion. She asserts that grit and effort contribute more to an individual’s achieving and sustaining success than their talent. Several studies found correlation between grit and the academic performance of students [e.g., 30], but it seems that the perseverance facet of grit has the strongest predictive validity [31]. The similarity between grit and self-efficacy is that an individual with a high sense of self efficacy has the ability to cope with difficulties and persevere. However, grit also emphasizes the concepts of passion, interest, practice, and hope.

2 METHODOLOGY

The present study used a qualitative approach to examine life stories of people with disabilities. Each life story is unique and enables the individual to express their feelings, thoughts, aspirations and hopes, as well as their experiences as they are recalled and retold, expressing their authentic voice. Life stories have been used to explore the perspectives of people with disabilities on issues such as disability and identity [e.g., 35].

2.1 Participants

We used a purposeful sample of 18 participants with various disabilities, fifteen men and three women, who had gained notable occupational status and sometimes even public acknowledgement. These participants worked in a variety of occupations: business, sports, politics, art, religion, law, and NGO leadership. The age range of the participants was 26–67 (M = 50.5).

For the present study Reiff and colleagues’ definition of success was chosen [8], since it is more objective and operational than other definitions mentioned earlier.

They defined success as varying levels of occupational success, based on the following criteria: income level, educational level, job classification, job satisfaction, and professional status. Participants who fulfilled at least three of the above criteria were recruited, and most of them fulfilled four of these
criteria. It was decided not to include the criterion of income level directly as this is a sensitive issue in our society, and since there are significant differences in income among the various occupations. Nevertheless, at least some of the interviewees had a high income due to their role and occupation.

2.2 Instruments

The main instrument used was an open, in-depth interview conducted individually. The participants were asked to tell their life story in a free-flowing manner. Following the initial open-ended narrative, we asked follow-up questions designed to clarify, expand, or focus on previous points, phrases, or expressions. Still, in order to learn in greater depth how the educational system at various ages promoted or hindered the processes that enabled the interviewees to attain success, a major part of the interview related to their experience in the educational system (pre-K–12) and to significant people who affected them at that time.

In addition, each participant completed a brief demographic questionnaire, including age, gender, educational level, family status, occupation and profession, and partner’s level of education.

2.3 Process

We recruited people who had received public attention in their occupation or professional role as successful people with disabilities. During our initial phone conversation (or in the case of a Deaf interviewee, text exchange), each person received an initial explanation of the study. Some immediately agreed to participate; others needed to check with their workplace regarding whether they could be interviewed. Then, a meeting was set up at a time and place convenient for the interviewee. For an interview with a Deaf participant, a professional sign language interpreter helped interpret the interview. Each participant signed an informed consent form. Some of them asked to review the transcript of the interview before they approved it. All interviews were recorded without including the interviewee’s name and then transcribed by a professional company that was chosen because it employs people with disabilities.

2.4 Data Analysis

The findings were analyzed using content analysis, although we followed the initial stages of grounded theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Glazer & Strauss, 1967). In the first stage, a coding system was developed using open coding of the concepts found in the quotations of each interview. The concepts that emerged were recorded alongside the quotations in the coding notes. Statements and expressions that were similar and repeated were grouped according to more general concepts or subcategories.

In the second stage, the coding of all the interviews was compared. Similar concepts and terms that recurred were combined to construct cross-interview subcategories, which were later clustered into several main themes.

Interjudge agreement between the two authors and a trained research assistant was implemented to strengthen the reliability of the findings. In each theme, we focus below on the major subcategories perceived by the interviewees as influencing their self-efficacy and grit.

2.5 Ethics

All participants were independent, functioning adults who could make an informed decision regarding their participation in the study. All participants received a general description of the study and its purposes and were asked to sign an informed consent form. With blind participants, the researchers read the informed consent form aloud and pointed to where they could sign. Some of the participants requested their interview’s transcript for final approval. In those few cases that participants had any comments or requests for corrections these were done to their satisfaction. The study proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institution where both researchers work.

3 RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews revealed three main resources that contributed to the success of students with disabilities: The influence of educational figures and conditions within the educational system; The importance of families; and personal characteristics and strengths. The present study will
focus only on the contribution of educational figures within and outside the formal educational system, and on various conditions within the educational system that helped lead students with disabilities to success. Additional results will be described and discussed in future papers.

There were various types of supports provided to students with disabilities: Efficacy-enhancing messages from educational figures, supports and accommodations within the educational systems; and supports provided by external educational figures.

3.1 The Formal Educational System

3.1.1 Efficacy-enhancing messages.

The most meaningful efficacy-enhancing messages were given by significant figures in the educational system, who conveyed to the students that they believed in the students and in their ability to succeed. Sometimes the message was direct, as Y., a successful restaurant entrepreneur with severe ADHD relates:

I had a high school teacher who believed in me and told me, “You’re a special kid and you need to do more and you need to lead,” and she invited my parents and told them, “You should know that he’s an unusual person, he’s special, he could succeed much more.”

3.1.2 Supports and accommodations.

The commitment and willingness of teachers to dedicate their time and energy to the students’ success stood out. It required making accommodations for these students that would enable them to complete the required tasks despite their disability. A blind woman who studied in mainstream education said: “There were three teachers who, whenever there was some difficulty, first of all copied the test in Braille for us all and made sure we had books and whatever we needed from the library for the blind.” (M.)

A clergy with severe CP told us:

When it was time to take the matriculation exams [final exams during junior and senior years of high school, which typically include written expression items], the teachers had to change them into multiple choice questions since my writing is very slow. All the teachers gladly took it upon themselves. (Sh.)

3.2 Support from Professionals Outside the Educational System

Occasionally, when the formal educational system failed to evaluate and academically support the participants, parents found an external support system for them, such as private tutors, as Ay., a media professional, recounts: “I had tons of private lessons in English and math and in everything.”

A military officer with congenital blindness told about a woman who volunteered to teach him life skills in the afternoons:

She would come to our house in the afternoon, and she would also come to the kindergarten. . . And she did it all based on intuition. She didn’t study it anywhere. She had a natural tendency, but she didn’t have any formal education and she did it voluntarily, as far as I know. She taught me, for example, how to tie my shoelaces, to organize things at home, to get organized, and we would read a little together. (H.)

4 CONCLUSIONS

Our study focused on the influences of educational figures and conditions within the educational system that helped people with disabilities diagnosed in childhood to attain notable success in various occupations. Our purpose was to reveal what helped enhance these individuals' self-efficacy and grit at different stages of their schooling. Our discussion will focus on the following four main issues: the importance of efficacy-enhancing messages, the role of significant figures in educational systems and in the community, and the importance of educational supports, accommodations and creative solutions.
4.1 Importance of Efficacy-Enhancing Messages

Messages carry significance, especially messages from the most important figures in a child’s life—parents and teachers. Our results suggest that verbal and nonverbal messages conveying a belief in the student’s abilities and chances for success play an important role in the development of self-efficacy, which eventually leads to occupational and professional success. Bandura’s theory [23] suggests that Verbal Persuasion (one of the four factors that shape the development of self-efficacy), helps individuals believe that they have what it takes to succeed. The current study’s results support Bandura’s theory and indicate that these messages have an important role in convincing individuals regarding their ability to succeed, especially when these messages come from significant educational figures. In our study it was the combination of believing in the student’s ability to succeed and the demand that they be like everyone else, along with the implicit message of the need to work hard to achieve success. The demand to invest effort and not give up despite the challenges faced is also a powerful self-efficacy and grit-enhancing message.

Asakereh & Dehghannezhad [27] claim that school success is a challenge, particularly for students with disabilities, and in part, this can be attributed to the students’ level of self-efficacy. Thus, it is essential to strengthen the self-efficacy of all students, especially students with disabilities.

4.2 The Role of Educational Figures

It appears that beyond sending a message of believing in the student’s ability to succeed, the dedication of teachers to the students and their willingness to go beyond the call of duty helped instill in them the perception of “no pain, no gain.” It matches the second factor (Vicarious Experiences) in Bandura’s theory of factors that help shape self-efficacy. The results showed that teachers were willing to dedicate their free time to give these students extra tutoring, and that a principal was willing to stand up against parents of nondisabled students for the inclusion of a student with disabilities. Thus, these significant figures’ implicit message was that perseverance, effort, and persistence toward an important goal (the building blocks of grit) are the key for success.

Efficacy-enhancing messages expressed both verbally and nonverbally to students with disabilities support positive psychology’s claim that intensifying these resources can help individuals fulfill their potential [3]. The fact that significant educational figures enhanced the self-efficacy of these young students enabled them to attain success later in life [32] and actualize their occupational aspirations and purposes [33]. Moreover, the uncompromising dedication of teachers, and their persistence to act in the student’s best interest despite the challenges they faced themselves, probably contributed to the development of the students’ grit and perseverance, which, according to Duckworth [29], is a developing trait. We believe that grit is also learned through modeling of significant adults in the students’ environment.

Social support and academic adaptations and accommodations also played an important role in many participants’ success at school. Fighting for social and academic inclusion through creative and flexible solutions helped some of the participants to develop a social support network with their peers. These findings support the claim for the necessity of social and academic adaptations and accommodations for successful inclusion [e.g., 36].

4.3 Educational Accommodations and Creative Solutions

As we mentioned before, self-efficacy per se is not sufficient for achieving desirable results if it is not accompanied by the skills and abilities required for completing the task (Author b, 2012). That is why, in order for students with severe disabilities to succeed, it is necessary to think outside the box. Students with disabilities must receive relevant accommodations in teaching, learning materials, and testing. These can be implemented only with flexibility, creative thinking, and benevolence, as demonstrated in the actions of the teacher who took the student on his scooter so that he could take part in an agricultural lesson, or the teachers who made sure all the teaching materials were in Braille.

However, these accommodations are more readily provided when the student’s disabilities have been properly diagnosed. Unfortunately, in some cases, students with severe disabilities are either underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed and therefore do not receive the necessary accommodations and supports. Among our participants, a few were not properly diagnosed, and only through their parents or solutions outside the educational system could they develop their sense of self-efficacy and experience success.
The present study adds to the scarce literature on successful adults with disabilities, which mainly focuses on adults with learning disabilities, by demonstrating the commonalities that can be found among experiences of successful adults with various disabilities.

In light of the increasing influence of positive psychology and the studies of factors that promote the development of self-efficacy and grit, the current study can make an important contribution to the growing body of research on successful factors in the education of students with disabilities, as well as to inclusive and special education teacher training.

4.4 Limitations of the Current Study

This qualitative study examined in-depth stories of successful people with disabilities. Some of these people have reached high occupational status and held unique positions, compared to many able-bodied as well as disabled people. Thus, to some extent, each story represents a unique case, and generalizing the study’s findings to all people with disabilities in Israel or in other countries should be done with caution. In addition, the sample used for the study was a purposeful one, although the authors went to great lengths to recruit people of various ages, both men and women, and of varying occupations, in an attempt to find commonalities among the different participants.

In addition, we selected people who fulfilled three of the five criteria defined by Reiff and colleagues (2007), assuming in advance that these criteria could be measured subjectively and based on public recognition of these people’s attainments and activities.

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