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# The relationship between the level of school-involvement and “Learned helplessness ”among special-education Arab-Palestinian teachers in Israel

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## Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between involvement, in decision-making at the school and learned helplessness among special-education teachers in the Israeli Arab sector. The importance of this study lies in its focused examination of variables which correlate with states that have an adverse effect on the education system, such as stress and burnout. The findings gave considerable support to the hypotheses that predicted a significant negative correlation between school involvement and learned helplessness. The conclusions of this study support greater involvement of teachers in the school in order to improve their well-being and work efficiency.

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*Keywords:* Learned helplessness, school involvement, special-education, Arab Palestinian teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decades, we have become aware of rising work dissatisfaction, burnout, a desire for career change and so forth, among teachers of special education. These manifestations of discontent have grown to be a major concern, and call for a thorough examination. A preliminary inquiry elicited several points that require empirical study in order to evaluate their magnitudes and frequencies.

It is in the nature of their work that special education teacher's deal on an everyday basis with difficult pupils, and as a result their successes are minor at best and may in fact go unnoticed. Teachers are thus faced with a situation in which what they do (teach) does not correlate with the results (pupils' academic progress). In time this may drive them into a state of classic learned helplessness. They develop a negative cognitive set wherein they regard themselves as inapt teachers; some choose to retire, while others simply stop trying to interact with the students. The latter reaction, which is expected in light of previous research, was clearly manifested during our

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observations; we noticed that many teachers were working without a formal academic curriculum, showed a lack of initiative, frequently complained about the situation in the schools, called in sick and skipped work days. Some even went so far as to have themselves transferred to other schools. The characteristic symptoms of burnout among teachers are actually the behavioral and emotional manifestations of learned helplessness. However, one must not confuse learned helplessness with burnout, since the latter is a side-effect formed by the cognitive disturbance of learned helplessness.

#### *Purpose of the study*

The goal of the present study was to examine the relationship between the level of teacher involvement and learned helplessness among special-education teachers, with a focus on learned helplessness as a mediating variable of burnout.

#### *Learned Helplessness*

Seligman and Maier (1967) have systematically examined learned helplessness, a condition which has been attributed to motivational, cognitive and emotional deficiencies, developing due to an exposure of an organism to a series of events independent of its behavior and not under its control (Overmaier & Seligman, 1967).

As for mediating effects, several variables were studied as possible mediators between exposure to an uncontrollable situation and the development of learned helplessness symptoms. According to Sarason (1975) and Wine (1971), anxiety was found to be the mediating variable that may explain the formation of motivational, cognitive and affective disturbances after exposure to a situation where the consequences are independent of responses. A model that supports Sarason's (1975) direction of attention theory is a model proposed by Khul (1981), in which a distinction is made between two cognitive styles that explain individual differences in attention-focusing. The two are the *action style*, in which the individual focuses on a task while trying to find ways to solve a given problem, and the *state style*, in which the individual, as a result of previous failures, focuses on himself, worries about his personal state, and thus develops low self-esteem. According to Khul, after experiencing a measure of lack of control, an individual will manifest higher attention focus and better performance, and will be more likely to overcome previous failures in order to facilitate the completion of the task. However, after experiencing multiple failures, a transition from an action cognitive style to a state style will occur. In the latter state, the individual is not attentive to the environment, nor does he or she perceive any alterations in the task's conditions that imply that the consequences have become controllable.

Another theory that underlines the cognitive aspect claims that lack-of-control effects are mainly determined by questions of 'why do people believe they have lost control in the first place?' and 'to what cause do they attribute the lack of control?', or both. The theory illustrates three dimensions of attribution: *internal* versus *external attribution*, *stable* versus *unstable attribution* and finally, *specific* versus *global attribution* (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). It is noteworthy that today the study of learned helplessness in humans generally involves paying greater attention to attribution style as a significant construct. Therefore we have referred to this construct in the learned helplessness questionnaire used in this study.

#### *Learned Helplessness in the School System*

Since the condition of learned helplessness first became the subject of scientific inquiry, a number of studies have been conducted in order to examine the possible role it plays in the school system, mainly with special-needs pupils. The reason why the latter population was chosen lies in the constant pressure and chronic deficiencies it endures, leading to higher risk of developing learned helplessness symptoms. Findings have underlined the great vulnerability and high level of learned helplessness of this special-need population compared with the norm (Agbaria, 2000; Chapman, 1988; Dally & Blocofsky, 1992; Hersh, Stone & Ford, 1996; Newcomer & Barebuam, 1995; Rodriguez & Routh, 1989).

As for learned helplessness among teachers, this has yet to receive adequate scientific attention, despite the subject's importance and its relevance to numerous difficulties which school systems face, such as burnout and lack of motivation in teachers. In the scientific literature there exists a popular construct that reflects the emotive-behavioral manifestation of learned helplessness, namely *burnout*. However, even though this construct has enjoyed extensive studies, it is still a somewhat controversial term, and researchers use it in various ways. In Maslach and

Jackson (1981) burnout was defined as a syndrome with three components: *emotional exhaustion*: tiredness, low energy, a feeling of being overworked; *depersonalization*: objectifying others, negative and cynical attitudes towards clients; *lack of personal fulfillment*: negative feelings towards oneself, and especially towards work with one's own clients. According to a different definition, burnout has fewer components: *physical fatigue*, *mental fatigue* and *emotional exhaustion* (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) have defined burnout as a continuous loss of ideals, energy and interest as a result of work conditions.

Most of the characteristics derived from the aforementioned definitions coincide with the cognitive, emotional and motivational characteristics of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). For example, one of the components of burnout described above was a lack of personal fulfillment in the workplace, despite the worker's efforts. Such a feeling may lead the worker to develop signs of stress and depression; when the worker feels that his efforts are to no avail, he or she will cease trying (Abramson et al., 1978). Since this state matches the cognitive expression of learned helplessness, it may well prove worthwhile to examine learned helplessness as a possible major mediating factor of the burnout syndrome.

A large number of studies have found several predictors of burnout and lack of motivation among teachers in general and special-education teachers in particular. It was found that parental and administrative support is important in reducing burnout and encouraging motivation amongst special education teachers (Platt & Olson, 1990; Taylor & Salend, 1983; Zabel & Zabel, 2002). Other burnout predictors in this regard were: *unclear assignments*, *lack of colleague support*, *school conflicts* (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Embich, 2001; Pullis, 1992), *stress*, *unsupportive school climate* (Miller, Brownell & Smith, 1999), *advanced age in the workplace*, *difficult student population*, *inadequate home training* (Banks & Necco, 1990; Zable & Zabel, 2001), and *administrative failure in devising and implementing activities and plans* (Cherniss, 1980, 1988). Another study emphasized organizational characteristics as significant contributing factors to teacher burnout, such as school size, number of classrooms and the organizational climate (Sakharov & Farber, 1983). Additionally, several factors were found to contribute to reducing burnout levels and improving motivation. Factors such as nurturing teachers' self-efficacy, autonomy, search for alternative reinforcement sources, differentiation between one's private life and the workplace and lastly, developing personal coping strategies (Brownell, 1997; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss, 2001).

Clearly burnout is a construct which has been frequently addressed in the scientific literature as a variable that can explain multiple problems in the educational system. Several predictors, as well as mediating variables between the school environment and burnout, have been proposed. *Sentimentality*, *proneness to idealism*, *devotion*, *compulsion* and *violence aversion* (Friedman & Lotan, 1993), *external locus of control* (McIntyre, 1984), *professionalism* and *self-esteem* (Friedman and Farber, 1992) have all been mentioned as mediating variables. Newer studies have also addressed self-efficacy as a burnout mediating variable (Brownell, 1997; Cherniss, 1982, 1995; Tarbia, 2001; Tripp, 2000).

In the context of learned helplessness, one study found that the following factors affect the level of learned helplessness, in rising order: *job-satisfaction level in schools*, *anger level when the job is perceived as meaningless*, *lack of control over the working process* and *lack of positive school-interactions* (Mykletun, 1985). Other researches have examined organizational effects on learned helplessness. School size has been seen as one of the main contributors to learned helplessness, since it leads to a lower sense of control and involvement, which in turn can bring about learned helplessness and burnout (Edelwich et al., 1980; Wicker & Kauma, 1974). Potter (1998) addressed the issue of learned helplessness as a mediating effect of burnout; he found that the sense of control was a significant factor in the workplace, and underlined that the locus of control, in regards to workplace situations, can influence an employee's motivation and burnout levels. The above findings are supported by the fact that people who have experienced workplace burnout were found to manifest higher levels of learned helplessness with lower self-esteem (McMullen & Krantz, 1988). Moreover, Wethered (1984) has shown that learned helplessness is an integral prerequisite to burnout development. Other studies have placed a greater emphasis on locus of control, a prime construct in learned helplessness that may lead to a significant increase or decrease in burnout level (McIntyre, 1984; Peters, 1985). In a study that examined the relationship between levels of school intervention and motivation among teachers, a positive correlation was found between motivation and control expectations, as well as between self-efficacy and internal attribution to success (Saul & Willy, 2005).

In the above review of the literature several variables loom large as contributing factors to burnout increase among teachers. Note, too, that many of these variables are also relevant predictors of the classical learned helplessness condition. Among these variables are *autonomy*, *support*, *self-efficacy* and *coping strategies*. As

suggested earlier, burnout manifestations derive mainly from an employee’s own conclusion regarding his or her inability to alter and influence events (learned helplessness). It is therefore quite likely that learned helplessness will be found to occur among special-education teachers.

To summarize we can say that in these studies various mediating and objective predictors are identified, but learned helplessness, although considered theoretically as a main mediator between predictors, aversive situations and the level of burnout and motivation, is not addressed as such. Clearly according to Seligman’s classical theory, subsequently to experiencing sequential failures, and/or uncontrolled situations, the main disturbance is cognitive in nature. The formation of a negative cognitive set prevents the organism from escaping its predicament. Therefore, it is postulated that this disturbance is at the root of burnouts, decreased motivation and stress. The other predictors are side-effects of the main mediating variable, learned helplessness. A study to determine which predictors may influence learned helplessness may thus provide us with an understanding of how to devise future tools for identifying learned helplessness and predicting its various behavioral and emotional consequences.

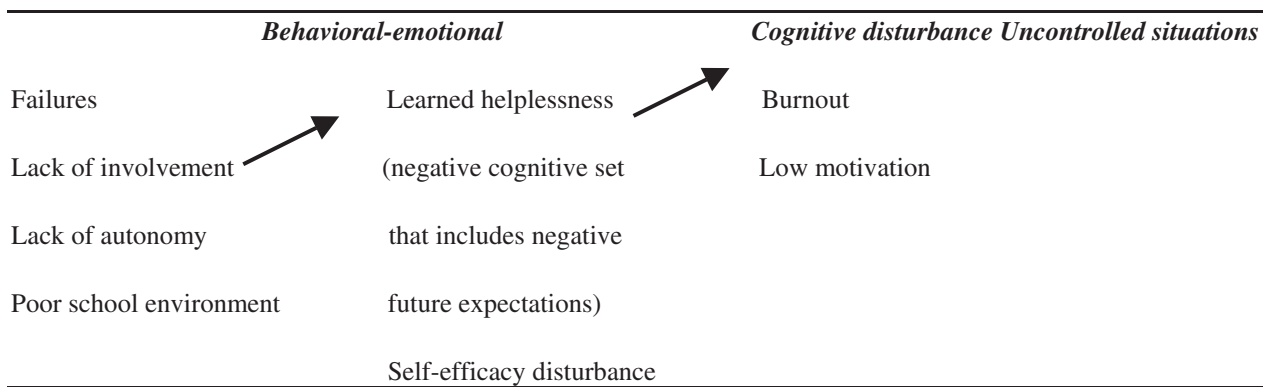


Figure 1 The learned helplessness model

*Hypothesis*

- A. A significant negative correlation will be found between teachers’ level of school-involvement and learned helplessness.
- B. The negative correlation between female teachers’ level of school-involvement and learned helplessness will be significantly higher than male teachers’. This expectation is based on Saul and Willy (2005), in which female teachers are shown to display a higher level of vulnerability to unsupportive work conditions.
- C. Learned helplessness will be significantly higher among veteran teachers in the workplace as opposed to newer teachers. As Tarabia (2001) has shown, lower motivation, less initiative and multiple complaints in the workplace are associated with seniority.
- D. The level of school-involvement will be significantly higher among veteran teachers in the workplace as opposed to newcomers.

**2. Methods**

*Participants*

Research population: 120 male and female special-education teachers from 1<sup>st</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade from various schools located in Israel’s Haifa District. (n=36 males, 84 females) were randomly chosen from several special-education

schools in the Haifa District. Participants' ages ranged from 22-48 years (mean=34.45, SD=8.89). Seniority ranged from 1-24 years (mean 15.8, SD=4.65).

#### *Instruments*

*The school-involvement scale questionnaire*, based on an existing questionnaire designed to examine headmasters' attitudes towards teachers' school involvement. The questionnaire consists of twenty items, and each teacher is required to indicate his/her stand on a scale of 0 to 4 (0: strongly disagrees; 4: completely agrees). Reliability was examined and Cronbach alpha was  $r=0.91$ . After a validity examination, only items with a score of at least 0.4 and with a common measure on factor analysis were chosen. In order to check the semantic content of the items, the questionnaire was initially distributed to expert psychologists and only the questions that received unanimous agreement were chosen.

*Learned helplessness questionnaire*, taken from a study that examined learned helplessness, with validity level of 0.79; reliability was examined and Cronbach alpha was  $r=0.86$  (Quinless & Nelson, 1988). The questionnaire examines cognitive, motivational and emotional components of learned helplessness among the teachers. The questionnaire consists of twenty items, on each of which the teacher is required to indicate his/her stand on a scale of 1-5 (1: strongly disagrees; 5: completely agrees). Reliability and validity examinations were conducted. Reliability was  $r=0.90$ ; as for validity, only items with a score of at least 0.4 and with a common measure in factor analysis were chosen. In order to check the semantic content of the items, the questionnaire was distributed to expert psychologists and only the questions that received unanimous agreement were chosen.

#### *Procedure*

The teachers were asked to complete two questionnaires; they were told that the task was anonymous and that the data would be used for research purposes only.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

In order to test the first hypothesis, that a significant negative correlation exists between the level of school involvement and learned helplessness, a Pearson test was conducted and a significant negative correlation was found ( $r=-.446$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This finding is consistent with previous studies (Brownell, 1997; Edelmich & Brodsky, 1980; Gersten et al., 2001; Mykletun, 1985; Wicker & Kauma, 1974). This finding points to a number of new directions in the study of special-education teachers as a group, and demonstrates the importance of teachers' involvement in school life in terms of decision-making and establishing school policies, based on teachers' personal sense of self-control, self-perception and a feeling of possessing the power to change things. In other words, the more teachers are involved with school management, the more they will have a sense of control, optimism and a belief that they can change things and make progress.

The second hypothesis also was verified; female teachers did indeed manifest a significantly higher level of negative correlation between their level of school-involvement and learned helplessness, compared to male teachers. Both sexes demonstrated significant differences, but the correlation in the female teachers group was  $r=-0.579$  whereas in the male teachers group it was  $r=-0.025$ ,  $r>0.05$ . This finding is consistent with previous studies that have examined female teachers' sensitivity to stress and burnout compared to male teachers (Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble & Zellman, 1978; Israeli, Friedman & Schrift, 1982; Saul et al., 2005), although it should be pointed out that the present study does not address sensitivity to stress or burnout, but to the relationship between the level of school-involvement and learned helplessness. Thus the findings show that the correlation between a teacher's school performance and emotional-self perception is greater in females more than in males. In an additional analysis no significant differences in the level of school-involvement or learned helplessness among male and female teachers were found. The differences were present only regarding the correlation significance between school-involvement and learned helplessness.

The third hypothesis addressed the differences in the level of learned helplessness at various seniority levels (in years). The variance of learned helplessness was examined between seniority levels. ANOVA analysis was conducted with learned helplessness as the dependent variable and levels of seniority (1-7; 8-15; 15+) as the independent variable (see Table 1).

Table 1:ANOVA analysis between seniority and learned helplessness

Learned helplessness	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between groups	6.78	2	3.39	10.16	0.000
Within groups	12.34	117	0.33		
Total	19.12	119			

The ANOVA results demonstrated significant differences in learned helplessness between the different levels of seniority { $F=23.34$ ,  $p<0.000$ }. In a Scheffe test it was found that the main difference in the level of learned helplessness stems from the difference between the 8-15 year group ( $M= 2.61$ ) and the 1-7 and 15+ year groups ( $M= 1.66$ ;  $1.99$  respectively). Table 2 shows that the mean of the 8-15 year group was higher than the mean of the other seniority groups.

Table 2:Subjects' mean learned helplessness at the different levels of seniority

Seniority	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1-7	29	1.66	.340
8-15	52	2.61	.640
15+	39	1.99	.650

These findings may be explained by those obtained for the fourth hypothesis (see Table 3), showing higher levels of school involvement among teachers with greater seniority levels. Therefore we assume that a greater level of school involvement will eventually counter teachers' learned helplessness. As we can see in the fourth hypothesis, teachers with 8-15 years of seniority show low school involvement, and this in turn contributes to a higher level of learned helplessness.

The fourth hypothesis addressed the differences in the level of school involvement compared to seniority level. The variance of school involvement was examined among seniority levels. An ANOVA analysis was conducted with school involvement as the dependent variable and levels of seniority (1-7; 8-15; 15+) as the independent variable (see Table 3).

Table 3: ANOVA analysis between seniority and school involvement

	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between groups	11.35	2	5.67	23.34	0.000
Within groups	8.99	117	0.24		
Total	20.34	119			

The ANOVA results demonstrated significant differences in the level of learned helplessness between the various seniority groups { $F=23.34$ ,  $p<0.000$ }. In the Scheffe test it was found that the main difference in the level of learned helplessness stems from the difference between the seniority group of 15+ years ( $M= 3.06$ ) and those of 1-7 and 8-15 years ( $M= 2.31$ ;  $1.75$  respectively). Table 4 shows that the mean of the 15+ year group was higher than the means of the other seniority groups.



Table 4: *Subjects' mean learned helplessness at the various levels of seniority.*

Seniority	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1-7	29	2.31	0.69
8-15	52	1.75	0.33
15+	39	3.06	0.44

These findings are consistent with the research hypothesis that the greater the level of teachers' seniority the greater their school involvement will be. As shown in table 4, teachers with 15+ years of seniority have a higher school involvement score. Teachers with 1-7 years of seniority show a moderate degree of school involvement. These findings are consistent with the well-known tendency to involve more senior teachers in school activities.

The most surprising findings were related to the third and fourth hypotheses: the low level of school involvement and the high level of learned helplessness in the group of teachers with 8-15 years of seniority. We had hypothesized earlier that rather moderate levels of school involvement and learned helplessness would be found, contrary to the actual findings. A possible explanation is the following. As teachers begin their career in the school system they are highly motivated to alter situations, to change and to intervene. However, as the years progress, this motivation subsides due to lack of involvement and goal fulfillment. As a consequence, teachers become 'stuck' in a routine and begin to feel inapt, as learned helplessness develops. Nevertheless, with age, school principals tend to involve the more senior teachers in school management, an act that greatly improves teachers' mood and makes them feel more capable. Perhaps, too, veteran teachers are less in need of refresher courses and are thus more available for school activities than younger teachers at the second seniority level (8-15 years), who may be in the process of continuing their studies and thus perceive themselves as less active and involved in school activities.

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