

3-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Qutaiba, A. (2011). The Relationship between the Level of School-Involvement and Learned Helplessness among Special-Education Teachers in the Arab Sector. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n2.1>

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## **The Relationship between the Level of School-Involvement and Learned Helplessness among Special-Education Teachers in the Arab Sector**

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*Abstract: Acquired or learned helplessness is one of the most popular research subjects reported in the psychological literature in recent decades. 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 that correlate with states that have an adverse effect on the education system, such as stress and burnout. Special-education teachers were randomly selected from several special-education schools. The findings gave considerable support to the hypotheses that predicted a 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.*

### **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 exposure of an organism to a series of events independent of its behaviour and not under its control (Overmaier & Seligman, 1967). In their first experiments, one group of dogs was exposed to inescapable electrical shocks (the dogs could not stop or reduce the current) while another group was exposed to controllable electrical shocks (they could be stopped by the dogs when they oriented their heads in a specific direction). A control group was given no electric shocks. Findings showed that dogs that were unable to stop the electrical shocks displayed passive behaviour, lack of initiative, anxiety, anger and subsequently a performance decrease 24 hours after exposure. Their behavioural changes remained evident even after the dogs were transferred to a cage in which they were able to control the shocks. The dogs that had been assigned to the uncontrollable electrical shock group sat passively, making no attempts to move to the other side of the cage and avoid the electric shock.

Learned helplessness has also been found in humans; however, the aversive stimuli that were used were not electrical shocks but rather sounds (controllable/uncontrollable) or motor/cognitive tasks (solvable/unsolvable) such as the Raven Progressive Matrices, Levine's discrimination learning, storyline picture arrangement and mathematical questions (Hiroto & Seligman, 1975; Klein, Fencil-

Morce & Seligman, 1976; Lubow, Caspy & Schnur, 1982). Seligman et al. (1971) claim that when an organism is exposed to an uncontrollable reinforcement, it initially attempts to gain control over it. The organism may apply certain actions in order to alter the probability that the reinforcement will appear later. By experiencing repeated failures, the organism learns that the probability remains fixed whether it responds to the reinforcement or not. In other words, the organism learns that the reinforcement's presence is not under its control. Subsequently, when facing a new, although controllable, situation, the organism generalizes from past experience and deduces that the new situation is also not under its control. It therefore expects that subsequent reinforcements would also be uncontrollable. It is postulated that the lack of control explains the disorders (to be described below), and involves three components.

First, a perception of lack of control over a situation decreases the *motivation* to respond so as to achieve goals and attain reinforcements. When the organism realizes that reinforcements are uncontrollable, it will be less willing to make the effort to respond. Secondly, a perception of lack of control over a situation creates a negative *cognitive setting*, which obstructs the learning of a given relationship between certain responses and certain reinforcements. An organism that *expects* lack of control may experience greater learning difficulties in new situations. Finally, expectations of lack of control expectations are responsible for *affective disturbances*. As a result of not knowing how to avoid uncontrollable situations, an organism that expects to be unable to control the appearance of a reinforcement may experience high levels of stress and anxiety. Ergo, such an organism would lack the ability to predict when such situations can be expected to reappear and cease.

We can summarize Seligman's model as follows:

1. The exposure of an organism to a situation where there is no correlation between its reactions and their consequences causes that organism to try and alter the probability of the reinforcement's appearance, using its responses.
2. After experiencing repeated failures, the organism learns that the reinforcement is uncontrollable.
3. The organism formulates lack-of-control expectations regarding the future.
4. The organism generalizes its lack-of-control expectations onto a new situation.
5. The generalization creates motivational, affective and cognitive disturbances.

Such disturbances can be divided into three main types: First, there are *motivational disturbances*: subsequent to an exposure to situations in which the organism experiences lack of control, it will undergo a partial or complete reduction in motivation to respond to other aversive situations. Then there are *cognitive disturbances*: the organism will formulate a negative cognitive setting, yielding lack-of-control expectations about the effect which it has over reinforcements, and also about the inability of its responses to change the given situation. Finally there are *affective disturbances*: affects are expressed through anxiety and fear responses. Therefore, in case of even average emotional arousal, overexcitement and stress are experienced. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned three types coincide with the symptomatology of major depressive disorders (Seligman, 1975).

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. These researchers claim that anxiety is evoked in situations during which the organism's attempts to attain a certain goal fail and are being obstructed by various obstacles that the organism perceives as hard to overcome. In such situations, the organism discovers that its responses are inadequate to the situation as well as ineffective for achieving its goal. Its feeling of inefficiency triggers anxiety, accompanied by somatic and cognitive symptoms that reduce the performance level in various tasks. According to Sarason and Wine, the negative effect of anxiety on performance derives especially from the cognitive expression of anxiety (in which attention is directed to the self rather than to the task). In other words, when a person is experiencing high levels of anxiety, he or she will submerge into self-preoccupation, with high self-awareness, doubts and a feeling of diminished self-esteem. As a result such a person will find it difficult to focus on devising plausible problem-solving strategies for extricating themselves from their predicament.

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. The level of performance may therefore diminish. This model thus suggests that by an exposure to situations in which independence between response and consequence occur, the transition from an action to a state cognitive style and the subsequent direction of attention to the self are responsible for the negative effects on task performance.

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*. For example, internal, stable and global attribution may bring about long-term helplessness effects, including depression, decrease in performance and low self-esteem. In contrast, people that use external, unstable and specific attribution to lack of control, manifest less generalized and less stable symptoms. The latter are therefore more likely not to experience significant mood changes (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 that 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-behavioural 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 fulfilment 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; Miller & Norman, 1979). 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: *unclearly in role 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 include nurturing teachers' self-efficacy and autonomy, searching 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).

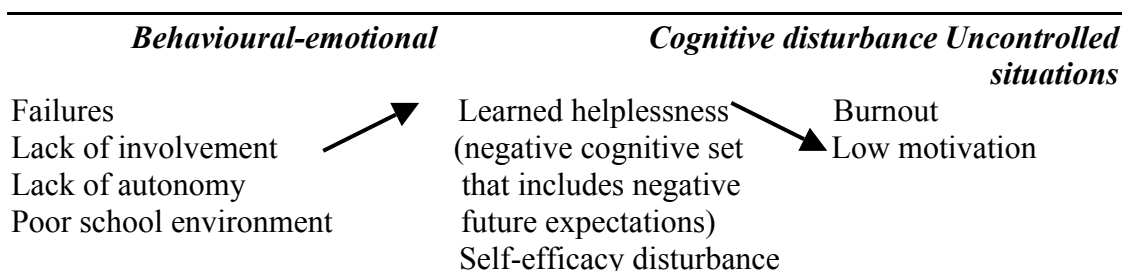
In the above review of the literature several variables loom large as contributing factors to burnout increase among teachers. Note, too, that many of these variables are also relevant predictors of the classical learned helplessness condition. Among these variables are *autonomy, support, self-efficacy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

There is no specific reference in literature to the vulnerability of Special Education teachers for acquired helplessness. Still, several studies have been made, reporting high levels of burnout and stress among this population, when compared to Jewish population (Tarabieh, 2001), in addition to a sense of alienation and un-involvement in school (Majadla, 2005). Several explanations have been suggested for these differences, such as stress under which the Arab teacher is working, combined

with social and economic stress, as well as poor school resources, lack of support by local authorities and lack of awareness on parents' side (Majadla, 2005).

In most schools, management is based and done mainly by a single school principal, with limited participation of few people in the school decision making, thus driving most staff members to the fringe (Majadla, 2005). This is combined with hard physical conditions in most schools, and specifically in Special Education schools, concerning buildings and quality (in some schools, Special Education classes are held in the corridor). Also, parents' cooperation is rather poor, as a result of their denying their contribution to the problem, casting it on the teachers. This reality increases even more the teachers' lack of involvement, exposing them to stress and burnout.

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, subsequent 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 behavioural and emotional consequences. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the learned helplessness model.



**Figure 1 The learned helplessness model**

Note: Cognitive disturbances mediate uncontrolled situations and behavioural emotional expression.

## Objectives

As psychologists who are familiar with the special-education school system, 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 teachers 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 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 behavioural 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.

In the many sessions we conducted with special-education teachers we noticed that they very often complained about the shortage of paramedical care at school, a lack of community involvement, the fact that teachers' input regarding the academic curriculum was ignored and that teachers did not participate in decision-making or in the formation of school policy, and lastly, the constant inappropriate changes introduced into the curriculum from above. These complaints, as enunciated by the teachers, were examined in a systematic way in order to assess their effects. Our perusal of the relevant scientific literature points to a relationship between work conditions, teachers' autonomy and motivation, considered to be one of the main components of learned helplessness. 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.

### **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.

### **Contribution of the Current Study**

The current study's contribution will enable us to obtain a greater understanding of learned helplessness in the school system. This has considerable implications for numerous relevant areas, in which its results can be applied to problems of importance for the educational system. The study is quantitative; it tries to assess the relationship between school involvement and learned helplessness among special-education teachers. It addresses concerns such as burnout, low motivation, dropouts and more, and can provide the school system with empirically



based specific recommendations to facilitate improvements, since learned helplessness is a multidisciplinary condition that may affect numerous areas in the system and thus cause many problems which have to be solved.

### **Research Questions**

- A. Is there a negative correlation between teachers' level of school-involvement and the level of learned helplessness?
- B. Are there seniority- and sex-related differences in the magnitude of correlation between school-involvement and learned helplessness?

### **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. Research sample: 40 special-education teachers (n=12 males, 28 females) were randomly chosen from several special-education schools in the Haifa District. Participants' ages ranged from 24-48 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

Following relevant approvals by the Ministry of Education, schools were approached. 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.

## Research variables

### Background variables:

- **Sex** (two levels: male, female), **seniority** (three levels, in years: 1-7, 8-15, 16+).

### Other variables:

- **Level of teachers' school-involvement:** was examined using the teachers' responses to the school-involvement questionnaire. Statements such as: "No matter how much energy I put into a specific task, I feel I have no control of the final product", "I feel that my inability to solve problems is responsible for my failures".
- **Learned helplessness:** was examined using the teachers' answers on the learned helplessness questionnaire. Questions such as: "To what extent are you involved in decisions of allocating pupils to classes?" "To what extent are you involved in developing curricula?"

## 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; Edelwich & 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 & Schrifft, 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 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).

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

**Table 1: ANOVA analysis between seniority and learned helplessness**

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.

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

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

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).

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

**Table3: ANOVA analysis between seniority and school involvement**

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.

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

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

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.

This finding can be explained by the theory of acquired helplessness, assuming that these teachers enter the educational system with high hopes for change and improvement, and many ideals concerning children's advancement. Yet, after some years, with all the difficulties of the Arab education system in general, and Special Education specifically, they start to develop new concepts about the futility of their efforts due to a number of reasons, including poor resources and lack of professional people. As a result, many of them withdraw or retrain for other professions, whereas the remaining ones suffer from frustration, with regard to their role and contribution. There are some phrases, very common among this population, "I feel I am just spending time in class", "what can be improved in these children", "I have no one to talk to or consult". This reality increases the gap between ideals and a hard, complex reality, causing them to doubt both their capacity to cope and the nature of their training – which in turn increases their sense of helplessness, affecting their motivation and involvement in school.

Regarding the helplessness decreasing with time, it can be explained by the fact that with senior teachers leaving – the teachers of intermediate seniority start to

perform roles at school, being more involved in school life, understanding the complexity of their roles and having more realistic expectations – all of which give them a sense of control and influence.

Another socio-economical explanation for these findings assumes that around their 8<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> year of work the teachers have a family life, including all familial and financial commitments, such as house-building, studies of spouse and children's education – all of which require their better part of attention. Thus, a tendency develops to look for additional jobs, to add to the rather modest teacher's wages. This reality may cause them to develop a negative attitude towards school and/or teaching, both of which require much effort with no appropriate financial reward.

## Conclusions

The findings of the study corroborate its assumptions, which predicted negative links between school involvement and the level of acquired helplessness among special-education teachers in Israel. So, one can argue that the more teachers are involved in school action, the more immune they will be against helplessness and burnout, compared to less involved teachers. Involvement can be by delegation of authority, consulting other teachers on curriculum and pupils' division. This conclusion calls for multiple structural and organizational changes in the hierarchic structure of special Arab education schools, as well as renewed thinking in the process of organizational and professional decision making at school. These changes should take into consideration the findings of this study and integrate them with the uniqueness of Arab teachers' culture – a culture emphasizing values of respect, involvement, appreciation and belonging.

Another finding indicates the fact that female teachers are more sensitive to situations of un-involvement than male teachers. The finding pointing out a stronger negative link among women, unlike among men, corroborates a previous finding concerning the importance of school involvement, mainly among women, who are more sensitive to involvement and sharing.

Another issue raised by the findings is the second level of seniority, found to be associated with poor degrees of involvement and high degrees of acquired helplessness – compared to the first and third level. It is important to point out that this second level of teachers is the most vital in school, being rather young, yet with considerable experience. Several explanations have been suggested for this finding, all sharing the thought that this population feels more frustrated and helpless by a variety of factors– which in turn make it less involved. Therefore, the study's recommendation is directed more at the direction of increased investment of resources in this group, either by benefits, roles or support workshops.

To sum up, the findings clearly give prominence to the importance of teachers' involvement in school work, which may lead to reduced levels of acquired helplessness, combined with increased motivation and a wish to change and contribute. Our study recommends to allow teachers to be involved in school doing and decision making, thus reducing the levels of acquired helplessness, which in turn is considered a significant predictor of burnout levels. The study's findings highlight the importance of clear distribution of work by school staff, emphasizing teachers' participation in setting school norms and procedures. This can be done by workshops and courses, held by experts who can introduce the spirit of sharing and involvement

in the school, in addition to other welding activities, such as outings and shared activities.

There is room for further studies, taking into consideration other variables that may be able to mediate – directly or indirectly – the explanation of the link between school un-involvement and acquired helplessness. Such variables are role in school, academic degree, economic situation, percentage of position, the number of additional studies, as well as psychological variables including self efficacy, cognitive style, level of motivation and control focus.

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