

Implementation of principles from the field of informal education in rehabilitation processes for young people with disabilities: the case of the Wings North program

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The transition to matriculation in general and among young people with disabilities in particular

The stage of early adulthood, between the ages of 18 and 25, is full of experiences that contribute to shaping the adolescent's personal, employment, and social identity towards constructing his status as an adult in society. This stage includes the completion of high school, leaving the parents' home, integrating into the world of employment, and creating significant interpersonal relationships (Newman et al., 2011). The transition to adulthood presents many challenges in various areas of life in the general population, and especially for young people with disabilities. As evidence, the long-term follow-up of young people with disabilities in several countries found that young people with disabilities face significant difficulties after completing school (Murray, 2003). It is possible that the difficulty stems from the lack of accessibility and adaptation of society to their needs and due to personal adjustment difficulties in various areas of life (Yivzori, 2010).

Young people with disabilities face a challenge of nonlinear transition, and in order to progress, a complex and protracted developmental process is required that involves multiple experiences in complex skills, independence, changes in relationships, behaviors and self-perceptions (Sharabi and Margalit, 2012). When this process takes place without mediation or relating to their unique characteristics and needs, the result may impair their proper integration and lead to their social exclusion later in life.

While in Israel, young people without disabilities usually enlist in military or National Service at the end of high school, many young people with disabilities encounter various barriers, personal and social, that prevent them from this vital developmental experience and from taking an active and meaningful part in the normative social fabric of life. This period of service is a significant milestone in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In Israel, this period is perceived as a stage of initiation and a catalyst for maturation processes that have far-reaching effects on the continued development and integration into Israeli society (Benbenishti et al., 2012). Beyond the opportunity given to young people to contribute to society as a human being, they acquire diverse personal, social and occupational skills that strengthen their sense of self-efficacy and help in future social and employment integration (Alfasi, 2012). Katan (2008) enumerates several goals that the young adult must achieve in the process of integration into society, including: 1. Integration into a framework that enables studying or training. 2. Occupational integration 3. Housing, 4. Integration into a normative social framework that provides a sense of belonging and identity.

All of this depends on the existence of a social network that provides emotional and economic support, vocational training and the completion of military or National Service. Today, despite the general trend to reduce social gaps and legislative changes that indicate a change in the perception and definition of disability in society, there are still significant gaps in the degree of social and community activity of people with disabilities in relation to people without disabilities (Arten et al., 2009).

Over the past decade, various transition programs have been developed, with the aim of providing young people with disabilities with the opportunity to have independent experiences in various areas of life, while providing counseling, guidance and instruction at varying levels of intensity according to the individual needs of the young people (Yivzori, 2010). Most of the programs are based on humanistic and ecological principles that emphasize the right and the desire of every person, regardless of his limitations, to develop and realize his personal potential and the reciprocal relations he maintains with his environment as a person who effects and is effected by the changing environment. (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Salmon & Kinnealey, 2006). These programs focus on three main areas: personal adjustment, occupational adjustment and quality of life. In addition, there is a great deal of emphasis on self-direction in recognition of the fact that the development of these young adults should be done in their own unique way. This principle is important because the goal is to awaken self-awareness of personal desires and needs, to enlist their participation in the process and to strengthen the skills of problem-solving, decision-making and self-advocacy (Sharbi and Margalit, 2012; Yivzori, 2010).

Another important principle in these programs is that they are limited in time, but not solely for budgetary considerations, but because of the recognition that this framework contributes to increased efficiency in rehabilitation work and emphasizes the nature of the various programs as tools for independent living so that when they complete them, the young adults have gained a variety of tools for managing themselves in the community. It is therefore clear that the transition programs see themselves as a "scaffolding" to help young people with disabilities overcome the dramatic transition involved in completing the education system and moving to the next stage of life.

End of School: A Challenging Transition

Kivunim organization noted that while young people with disabilities in the special education system enjoy the extended support of the education system until the age of 21, the next step for young people with disabilities who had been integrated into regular schools is not clear. For those young people, the end of school is the point where they often separate from friends in their age group. This separation emphasizes their difference and separateness and can create a crisis. Young people with disabilities often describe the year after the end of school as a year when everyone moved forward, and they were left behind, alone. Integration into the framework of National Service that includes returning home does not always meet the need of these young people to reduce their dependence on their parents toward a more independent horizon in a social framework compatible with age and social status.

This lack of a transition program for "integrated" youth at the end of school age was identified by Ayelet Shofati and Gidi Tzur (CEO of Kivunim and one of the authors of this article) graduates of the Mandel Leadership Program who decided to develop a program for this population suitable to their unique characteristics. Emphasis is placed on the transition involved in completing this stage in the education system, which is characterized by three main developmental challenges.

1. **Intensive separation-individuation processes**¹. Due to the ending of the status quo that was preserved during the school years, the young people seek greater separation, independence and distinctiveness from their parents. 2. **Transition from the task of learning task to one of employment**. A change that symbolizes the transition from receiving to giving, from passive to active.

¹ Separation and individuation is a developmental process which was described by the psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler (Mahler, 1994). This process describes the stages a normative baby goes through from the stage of autism (normal) and disconnection to separation and individualization which is characterized by uniqueness and independence (Nof, 2010). Blos, in his article "The Second Individualization" claims that the process that Mahler described repeats itself differently during adolescence and is a "second chance" to deal with conflicts of independence and separation (Blos, 1979).

3. Self-management in the community. In fact, this is the functional aspect of the transition and it occurs due to the gradual reduction of factors that mediate the world to the young person, which requires the young person to experience and deal with complex tasks such as decision making, managing material resources, taking responsibility for health and household management.

After thirteen years of working with young people with disabilities who cope with the transition described above, it seems that the challenges described are intensified because of the lack of experience when they were younger, the need to rely on their parents, the overprotection of parents and the lack of equal opportunities in aspects of service and employment. It is no wonder that many good people find themselves in their parents' home without a framework the year after graduation. When the young person continues to live in the parents' home and instead of going to school he does National Service, there is concern that the relationship with the parents will not undergo age-appropriate changes and that self-management skills will not develop sufficiently.

Sometimes, the parents' home continues the supportive dynamics that characterize the school years, in a way that becomes a barrier to experience and acquiring skills. Hence, a transition program is needed that will provide a broad response to the needs described for this population in their dramatic transition from school to the adult world. It is not enough for such a program to deal with the employment component, but rather it needs to promote separation from the parents (separation and individuation), transition from student to employee and maximal self-management, including by leaving home to an open, intensive, training, and time limited program. Often it seems that for young people with disabilities, leaving home is more critical than for the rest of the population, since these young people suffer from severe lack of experience and self-management skills. In many cases, remaining for a long time in the parent's home after graduation may delay growth and development.

Preparatory Program for Life - The Work Model of the Wings Program

Wings Program was established in 2004 by Gidi Tzur and Ayelet Shofati, with the assistance of JDC Ashalim, in order to provide a quality and time-limited rehabilitation training framework for young people with physical disabilities in order to help them lead independent lives in the community. A group of about a dozen young people of this kind live in the first year in a commune in Bustan Hagalil near the sea. Accompanied by a multidisciplinary team they do National Service in the morning which is adapted to each one personally. In the afternoon, they take part in a rehabilitation program that includes communal life, household management experience and intensive social activities. In the second year, the group moves to apartments in the community in Nahariya, where they manage their lives as independently as possible, continue their National Service, and practice independent management in the community, with reduced guidance and instruction. During the program, the trainees also experience planning and organizing trips and group events, leisure, sports and more.

Informal Rehabilitation - Rehabilitative Pedagogy

In order to meet the rehabilitation challenge that requires the transition of young people with physical disabilities at the end of the school period, there is a need to construct a relevant rehabilitation approach adapted to the characteristics of the transition. Previous professional acquaintance and, to a large extent, admiration for the significant educational activity of informal educational frameworks raised the possibility of lending to the rehabilitation world some of the characteristics and guiding principles of informal frameworks. This connection is not trivial because there is considerable variation between the field of rehabilitation and the field of informal education, both in goals and in practice. In the field of rehabilitation, and especially in the medical field, there is a focus on the attempt to achieve

functional improvement by restoring skills or creating ways of coping or compensating for damaged abilities, (Rehabilitation (medicine), 2016) while informal education focuses on advancing social goals and values by means of principles, content, organizations and tools with a flexible level of institutionalization free from the structures and rules which usually exist in school (Informal education, 2016). Seemingly, the distinction between these systems is clear from these definitions. However, formulating the relevance of integrating approaches to meet the needs of young people with disabilities at the end of school requires refinement and clarification. In his article "Towards a Theory of Non-Formality and its Implications for Youth", Reuven Kahane lists eight components of the informal education code (Kahane, 2000), see table 1 below.

The informal elements described by Kahane are essential for the development of normative adolescents in a postmodern society, since they create a safe, egalitarian, patient, creative and voluntary environment that enables intensive experiences in a relatively protected space with minimal implications for the future. The developmental playground called "Informal Education" enables the advancement of young people with disabilities during the transition to adult life. The Wings program was founded on the understanding that in order to narrow developmental gaps and become a quality transition program, a diverse and intensive collection of experiences of a social and, occupational nature is necessary while coping with self-management challenges. The principles of informal education can help create an environment that offers diverse opportunities for this experience from an un-judgmental place that encourages "many dives into the water" each day and which contains (comprehends) falls and failures while belonging to a group of supportive equals. In two brief case studies, we will refer to the expressions of the informal code in the Wings Program.

The Components of the Informal Code, (Kahane, 2001)	
Volunteerism	An autonomous position of choice that strengthens the status of young people and the congruence between personal tendencies and preferences and proposed services.
Multi-dimensionality	A variety of experiences that enable the acquisition of experience and skills according to personal skills and interests.
Symmetry	The existence of egalitarian and mutual reciprocal relations to establish and internalize universal norms and values.
Dualism	The simultaneous existence of social and personal ideas and tendencies allows us to experience different and even contradictory patterns of behavior. For example: competition as opposed to cooperation.
"Moratorium" ²	A temporary and legitimate stay of commitments and decisions that enables one the vital experience of trying out various life tasks and roles in a relatively "protected" space.
Modularity	Experiencing changing circumstantial situations which develops the ability to adapt and improvise in different situations.
Expressive Instrumentalism	A combination of activities whose outcomes are evident immediately and others which will have value in the future, in order to recognize the unique value of both types of action.
Pragmatic Symbolism	The symbolic importance of action and / or the translation of symbols into meaningful actions. In both cases, the meaning of actions and symbols is expanded.

Table 1 The dimensions of the informal code by Kahane

² Moratorium is a concept coined by the psychoanalyst Eric Erickson. Moratorium is a space in which trial and error are legitimate and even desirable. Normative mistakes do not bring punishment. In adolescence, the moratorium helps young people experience a wide variety of activities and sometimes make mistakes without having to pay a heavy or long-term price. (Erickson, 1968)

Case Study 1:

M is a young 18-year-old graduate of the regular education system with a motor disability who uses a wheelchair to get around. M came to the Wings of the North from a well-kept home and committed and devoted parents. M's mother spoke at first in the plural: "We came to the preparatory program." In the first few months, the staff accompanied the mother and asked her to transfer the management of the various areas to the young woman, in contrast to the way it was done until that point.

At the end of the first year, M expressed her desire to go to study at a university far from home. The mother, who was physically distant and very close emotionally, asked the staff to intervene and get her to change her mind. The team's opinion was that this was a big jump and too quick, and that the transition could end in failure. Despite this assessment, during the second year of the program, the staff held talks with the parents about the fact that for the first time the young woman was sketching a space for a "moratorium".⁵ This is an important developmental process that needs to be given space, even at the risk of failure. The space of the moratorium is the field in which healthy separation occurs from the parents and an individual identity is established. The pendulum movement, which includes leaving the house and returning at weekends, alongside emotional therapy that took place simultaneously with the preparatory program, enabled the young woman to process her feelings and the developmental change while making a breakthrough. Slowly, gradually, the young woman's self-management abilities grew stronger. Her parents, who watched the change and development, also underwent a process that enabled them to recognize M's separateness and later to rejoice and enjoy the fruits of her efforts.

In the fall of 2016, the young woman embarked on a new chapter in her life with an accompanying worker, which included university studies and housing outside her home in a remote area from her parent's home. The triadic structure which was created: the young woman, a rehabilitative framework, and the parents, represents the normative adolescent process in which the young adult expresses wishes that his parents perceive as immature or dangerous and creates an overt or covert confrontation around the realization of this desire.

The Mechina sees this clash as an important and vital normative developmental aspect that allows the young person to draw clear boundaries and gives him strength and motivation to independently manage his life and therefore does not rush to neutralize the conflict or decide who is right or what action should be taken. In the process described, we can see how to allow and protect the moratorium space that characterizes informal education, to become a developmental infrastructure for young people with disabilities. It is reasonable to assume that for the young woman beginning academic studies right after graduation was an immature move for both her and her family and it is doubtful that it would have succeeded. The combination of physically leaving home to a developmental "playground" that can contain falls during the process of separation, along with functional progress, has helped the young woman and her family transform their relationship into a more age-appropriate one based on abilities.

Case Study 2:

B. is a young woman who has been integrated into regular education, with high academic abilities and blindness. She came to the preparatory program out of great interest in living with a group in a commune and motivation to do National Service. The young woman set herself the goal of achieving independent mobility by train.

For a person with blindness, the train can be a convenient and accessible transportation solution, but on the other hand there is sometimes a fear of falling from the platform or getting lost. The Mechina staff accompanied B. on her first journeys on the train when she and her mother revealed heavy and understandable fears and anxieties about the situation. She was accompanied by young people her age from abroad who volunteer in the preparatory program. Pretty soon B learned to manage her journey independently, an achievement that greatly contributed to strengthening her sense of independence and ability. At the same time, during the group interactions in the afternoon, B was discovered as having impressive leadership abilities and she began to fill a central position in the group. In addition to National Service, she took part in organizing "Caffe Kavim", and initiated cultural meetings for her group members and other groups. At the same time, she began developing a romantic relationship with a participant from another program.

The symmetry that characterizes the dynamics of relations in the commune enabled her to use her emotional and cognitive abilities to make a significant personal contribution while her seeing companions gave her practical help with her physical mobility. Her central place in the peer group and her frequent transitions between the role of counselor and assistant to the role of the one being helped, also was projected on to the relationship with her parents. It seems that her reliance on her parents decreased and this allowed a transition to her reliance on the peer group and on herself. Today B lives outside her parent's house, in an apartment in Nahariya as part of Kivunim's graduates' program and is completing her bachelor's degree. She uses the train to travel independently and manages the household she lives in.

B's case shows us how symmetry in relationships can bring about functional change and can help acquire self-management skills among people with disabilities whose relationship with the environment are usually characterized by a lack of symmetry. The experience of traveling by train together with volunteers of the same age from abroad demonstrates an aspect of symmetry. This meeting provided an opportunity for a relatively egalitarian encounter, since the young people with disabilities see themselves as locals who mediate the language and culture in Israel, not only as people being cared for and patients.

Summary:

Young people with physical disabilities who finish school are at a challenging crossroads. In order to catch up with age-appropriate development processes, they must quickly create processes of separation from their parents and individuation, find a framework with occupational characteristics in the morning and make progress with their self-management abilities. While healthy young people achieve these developmental processes by service programs (National / military) that often involve living outside the home, young people with disabilities are often highly dependent on their parents, and their ability to access services and to advocate for their needs are limited. The preparatory programs for independent living enable these young people to effectively cope with these developmental challenges.

Mechina Wings North offers two years of accommodation in a commune of about 10 young people, rehabilitation training and employment experience in a personalized National Service. In addition to rehabilitative principles, the Wings Program uses professional work principles taken from the world of informal education (Kahane, 2000).

The idea is that the informal educational principles are necessary in order to reduce gaps and achieve maximum self-management in the community, since they meet the age-appropriate developmental needs of young people with disabilities. Informal education fosters values of voluntarism, reciprocity, and tolerance to failures, and as such it can serve as an almost normative developmental training ground and make possible the moratorium which is vital for the developmental tasks of this age. It is possible that additional rehabilitation programs of organizations that provide services to young people with disabilities can also gain from this if their rehabilitation intervention is supplemented by principles of work or activities of informal education.

These tools encourage the young person to take an active part, to identify other parts of himself aside from the disability, and to create interactions for him in which he takes on additional roles besides being "treated" or "rehabilitated." The formal education system, in its encounter with young people with disabilities, can stimulate initiative, choice and activity by using informal rehabilitative principles in order to stimulate motivation, choice and activity, and to improve self-image. Recently, the youth movements have joined a welcome project of integrating young people with disabilities into their ongoing activities, mainly out of the moral values of equality of opportunity and preventing exclusion. In addition to the ethical aspect, there is also an exceptional rehabilitative opportunity here to help these young people develop self-management skills and abilities.

We see great importance in providing rehabilitative tools to these informal education teams so that they can leverage the integration of young people with disabilities into their frameworks to promote the developmental processes of these young people, and not to deal only with accessibility. In conclusion, we believe that the rehabilitation world should integrate values from informal education as a means of enabling growth and development for young people with disabilities.

There is also a need for the world of informal education to introduce values and tools from the world of rehabilitation when it comes to a welcome process of integration. The Wings Preparatory program is trying to use these two content worlds to help young people meet the tremendous developmental challenges they face.

For any question please contact:

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