Between Two Worlds: Experiences of Students With Learning Disabilities Navigating Special Education and Mainstream Classroom Settings

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Students with learning disabilities navigating both special education and mainstream classrooms face unique challenges. This qualitative study explored the experiences of five third-grade students in a Northern Israel elementary school through semi-structured Hebrew interviews. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, three themes emerged: (1) navigating environments—characterized by contrasting academic pacing and teaching approaches between settings, alongside complex social dynamics where students reported feeling "part of two different groups but not belonging to either one"; (2) balancing support and independence—revealing students' sophisticated understanding of their evolving educational needs; and (3) developing identity—highlighting how self-perceptions varied between contexts. Despite difficulties, particularly in social integration, dual placement fostered diverse skills and aspirations. The findings suggest that successful dual educational placement requires structured transitions, intentional social integration programs, and adaptable support systems that evolve with students' changing capabilities.

Keywords: **learning disabilities; student experiences; inclusive education; mainstream education; special education**

Introduction

Understanding Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities (LD) represent a heterogeneous group of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by persistent difficulties in learning and using academic skills, despite adequate educational opportunities and the absence of intellectual disabilities or other primary causes (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These disabilities manifest as specific disorders in academic skills, including dyslexia (reading difficulties), dysgraphia (written expression difficulties), dyscalculia (mathematics difficulties), or combinations of these disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The impact of learning disabilities extends beyond academic performance, affecting cognitive processes such as working memory, processing speed, and executive functioning (Ji et al., 2021; Swanson & Zheng, 2014).

Learning disabilities are estimated to affect between 5% and 15% of school-age children globally, with varying prevalence rates across different educational systems and diagnostic criteria (World Health Organization, 2019). These students

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often experience significant challenges in academic achievement, information processing, and social-emotional development, making their educational placement and support services crucial determinants of their academic success and overall well-being (Dalgaard et al., 2022; Hehir et al., 2016; Wiener & Tardif, 2004).

Conceptualizing Educational Placement: Medical vs. Social-Ecological Models

The educational placement and support of students with learning disabilities can be understood through two primary theoretical frameworks: the medical model and the social-ecological model. The medical model views learning disabilities as individual diagnoses requiring specific interventions and accommodations (Kirk et al., 1983; Reindal, 2008). This perspective emphasizes the neurobiological basis of learning disabilities and the importance of specialized support, often leading to interventions focused on addressing individual deficits through targeted remediation in specialized settings. While this model has contributed significantly to understanding the neurological underpinnings of learning disabilities and developing specific interventions, it may overlook the role of environmental factors in student success.

In contrast, the social-ecological model, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) views human development as occurring within interactive nested social systems. This model emphasizes the dynamic interaction between an individual's capacities and their environment, suggesting that successful education depends on the fit between student capabilities, environmental demands, and available supports. Applied to learning disabilities, this framework suggests that student success is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the quality of classroom environments, peer relationships, teacher preparation, and support systems (Anderson et al., 2014).

The social-ecological perspective has been particularly influential in promoting inclusive education practices, highlighting how environmental modifications can support student success across different educational settings. This model suggests that effective support for students with learning disabilities requires consideration of multiple factors beyond individual remediation, including social integration opportunities, classroom climate, and the interaction between different educational environments (Anderson et al., 2014).

The current study draws on both theoretical frameworks, acknowledging the importance of understanding specific learning disabilities and their manifestations (medical model) while examining how students experience and navigate different educational environments (social-ecological model). This dual theoretical lens provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how students with learning disabilities experience and make meaning of their participation in both special education and mainstream settings.

The identification and diagnosis of learning disabilities typically involve comprehensive psychoeducational assessments that examine cognitive processes, academic achievement, and the exclusion of alternative explanations for learning difficulties (Flanagan et al., 2011). These assessments consider multiple factors, including cognitive profiles, academic performance patterns, and the impact of difficulties on daily functioning. In the Israeli context, the diagnosis of learning disabilities follows a multi-disciplinary approach, incorporating educational,

psychological, and sometimes medical evaluations to determine appropriate educational placements and support services (Feniger et al., 2022).

Students with learning disabilities often face unique challenges in navigating their educational experiences, particularly when transitioning between different educational settings (Dalgaard et al., 2022; Estell et al., 2008). While inclusive education has been widely accepted as a core educational policy internationally (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020) the implementation and effectiveness of various educational settings for students with LD continues to be a subject of significant discussion and research (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). The severity and nature of learning disabilities can significantly impact students' ability to benefit from different educational environments, with some students requiring intensive support in specialized settings while others may thrive in inclusive environments with appropriate accommodations (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Inclusive and Special Education in the Israeli Context

In Israel, where this study takes place, the special education system operates through two main educational frameworks: special education schools (segregated settings) and mainstream schools (Feniger et al., 2022). Within mainstream schools, students with learning disabilities can be enrolled either in general mainstream classes with support services or in separate special education classes. These special education classes, established within mainstream school buildings, provide a unique middle ground through smaller class sizes (about 12 students) and specialized staffing with special education teachers and teaching assistants. This structure creates a supportive learning environment while maintaining opportunities for inclusion with typically developing peers (Gindi, 2020). This approach reflects an understanding that students with learning disabilities may require varying levels of support in different academic areas, necessitating flexible educational arrangements that can accommodate their specific learning needs (Gindi, 2020; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015).

Recent developments in Israeli educational policy have further shaped this landscape. The Special Education Law amendment of 2018 reinforced the right of students with disabilities to be included in mainstream education settings while ensuring access to appropriate support services (Heiman & Avissar, 2022). This legislative framework reflects Israel's commitment to balancing inclusive education with specialized support, creating a unique context for examining the experiences of students with learning disabilities in different educational settings (Heiman & Avissar, 2022).

The understanding and definition of inclusive education differ between countries and even between schools within the same country (Graham, 2020; Kefallinou et al., 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Bombardelli, 2020) defines inclusive education as the process of reinforcing the capacity of education systems to welcome and reach out to all learners, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties. In contrast, "special needs education" refers to separate classes or instruction specifically designed for students categorized as having special educational needs (Bombardelli, 2020).

In Israel, where this study takes place, two main educational settings exist for students with learning disabilities (Feniger et al., 2022). The first consists of special

education schools (segregated settings), and the second is within mainstream schools (Feniger et al., 2022). Within mainstream schools, students with learning disabilities can be enrolled either in general mainstream classes with support services or in separate special education classes. These special education classes, which are commonplace in Israel, are established within mainstream school buildings, providing opportunities for students to participate in academic and social activities alongside their typically developing peers (Feniger et al., 2022).

The Israeli special education system emphasizes the importance of providing appropriate support while maintaining opportunities for inclusion. Special education classes in mainstream schools typically have smaller class sizes (about 12 students) compared to general education classrooms and are staffed by special education teachers and teaching assistants, creating a more supportive learning environment while still maintaining connection to the broader school community (Gindi, 2020). This approach reflects an understanding that students with learning disabilities may require varying levels of support in different academic areas, necessitating flexible educational arrangements that can accommodate their specific learning needs (Gindi, 2020; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015).

Recent developments in Israeli educational policy have focused on promoting inclusive practices while maintaining the flexibility of different educational settings to meet diverse student needs (Heiman & Avissar, 2022). The Special Education Law amendment of 2018 reinforced the right of students with disabilities to be included in mainstream education settings while ensuring access to appropriate support services (Heiman & Avissar, 2022). This legislative framework reflects Israel's commitment to balancing inclusive education with specialized support, creating a unique context for examining the experiences of students with learning disabilities in different educational settings (Heiman & Avissar, 2022).

Advantages and Limitations of Educational Settings

Following the development of inclusion-oriented educational philosophy, studies have documented multiple advantages for students with learning disabilities in mainstream settings, such as access to more academically advanced learning and the development of stronger social skills through interaction with their peers (Leifler et al., 2021). These benefits often include increased exposure to grade-level curriculum, enhanced social modeling opportunities, and development of age-appropriate communication skills (Krämer et al., 2021). However, research also indicates that students with LD may experience substantial difficulties in mainstream classrooms, including elevated rates of social exclusion (Hebron et al., 2015) low levels of peer support and challenges in adapting to the learning environment (Larcombe et al., 2019; Symes & Humphrey, 2012). The severity and nature of learning disabilities can significantly influence these experiences, with some students requiring more intensive support than others to succeed in mainstream environments (Grigorenko et al., 2020).

The educational placement of students with LD is typically conceptualized according to one of two main theoretical frameworks: the medical model of disability and the social-ecological model. The medical model views learning disabilities

primarily through individual diagnoses and neurological differences, emphasizing the need for specialized interventions and accommodations (Kirk et al., 1983; Reindal, 2008). This perspective often leads to interventions focused on addressing individual deficits and providing specialized support in segregated settings. The medical model has contributed significantly to our understanding of the neurobiological basis of learning disabilities and the importance of targeted interventions (Kirk et al., 1983; Reindal, 2008).

In contrast, the social-ecological model, conceived by Bronfenbrenner, (1979) views human development as occurring within interactive nested social systems, emphasizing the fit between the individual's capacities, the environment's demands, and the support provided to enable that individual's success. This model suggests that successful education for students with LD requires consideration of multiple factors, including classroom environment, peer relationships, teacher preparation, and available support services. The social-ecological perspective has been particularly influential in promoting inclusive education practices and understanding how environmental factors can either facilitate or hinder the success of students with learning disabilities (Anderson et al., 2014).

Current research has highlighted the importance of examining how different educational settings affect students' academic achievement, social integration, and emotional well-being (Berger et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020). Studies suggest that while special education classrooms can provide intensive, individualized support and specialized instruction tailored to specific learning disabilities, they may limit opportunities for social interaction and exposure to diverse learning experiences (Francisco et al., 2020). The effectiveness of special education settings often depends on factors such as teacher expertise in specific learning disabilities, availability of evidence-based interventions, and the implementation of appropriate accommodations (Francisco et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2015).

Conversely, mainstream settings offer rich social environments and higher academic expectations but may lack the specialized support some students with learning disabilities require (Francisco et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2015). The success of mainstream placement often depends on factors such as teacher training in differentiated instruction, availability of support services, and the implementation of appropriate accommodations for specific learning disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020; McLeskey et al., 2014). The complexity of these trade-offs underscores the need for careful examination of how students experience and perform in different educational contexts, particularly considering the varying manifestations and severity levels of learning disabilities.

Research Objectives: Exploring Dual Educational Experiences

Despite extensive research on inclusive education, there remains limited understanding of how students with learning disabilities experience and navigate different educational settings, particularly when they participate in both mainstream and special education environments within the Israeli educational system. This gap in knowledge is particularly significant given the increasing prevalence of hybrid educational models that combine elements of both settings. Furthermore, most existing research focuses on either mainstream or special education settings

in isolation, rather than examining the experiences of students who navigate both environments.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate how third-grade students with learning disabilities experience and navigate between special education and mainstream classroom settings in Northern Israel. Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) examine the academic experiences of students with learning disabilities as they transition between special education classrooms and mainstream inclusion, focusing on their engagement with curriculum, learning strategies, and academic performance; (2) explore the social dynamics and relationships these students develop and maintain across both educational settings, including peer interactions, friendships, and social support networks; and (3) understand the emotional and psychological impact of participating in dual educational environments, including students' self-perceptions, sense of belonging, and emotional well-being. Through in-depth qualitative analysis of students' lived experiences, this research aims to identify both the challenges and opportunities presented by dual educational placements, ultimately contributing to our understanding of how educational systems can better support students with learning disabilities.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of five third-grade students (ages 8-9) selected from a special education classroom of twelve students in a mainstream elementary school in Northern Israel. The group consisted of three boys and two girls; all native Hebrew speakers born in Israel. These students were specifically chosen as they were the only ones from their special education classroom who participated in the school's inclusion program and had been enrolled in the special education classroom for at least one full academic year.

The students' learning disabilities were formally diagnosed by the Ministry of Education's psychological services. The diagnoses included reading disorders (three students), writing disorders (four students), and mathematics disorders (two students), with some students having multiple diagnoses. All students demonstrated average cognitive abilities with specific processing deficits in areas such as phonological awareness and working memory.

Inclusion Patterns

To maintain consistency, all five students were included in the same mainstream classroom for Hebrew language classes, where they demonstrated sufficient comprehension skills to benefit from mainstream instruction with appropriate accommodations. Two students additionally participated in physical education classes, showing strong motor skills and social readiness for peer interactions. One student was also included in mathematics classes, demonstrating strong mathematical reasoning abilities despite requiring support for written calculations. Their behavioral profiles indicated good adjustment to school routines, which facilitated their participation in the inclusion program.

Selection Process

The selection of participants was based on natural educational placement rather than research criteria. From the special education classroom of twelve students, these five students were already participating in the school's inclusion program due to their academic readiness and ability to function in a mainstream classroom environment. The fact that all five students were included in the same mainstream classroom during Hebrew language lessons provided optimal conditions for comparing their experiences across both educational settings. The remaining seven students in the special education classroom continued their studies exclusively within the special education framework and were therefore not included in this research.

This selection process was determined through consultations with the students' special education teacher and review of their educational assessments. Key factors in their inclusion placement included: (1) demonstrated academic readiness in specific subject areas, (2) ability to function behaviorally in a larger classroom environment, and (3) potential social and academic benefits from mainstream exposure as documented in their individual education plans.

Educational Framework

The students experience their education primarily in a special education classroom while being included in mainstream classes for specific subjects. The special education classroom consists of twelve students with diverse learning disabilities and is staffed by a full-time special education teacher and a teaching assistant (6:1 student-to-staff ratio).

The classroom operates on a structured daily schedule, beginning with morning meetings for emotional check-ins and daily planning, followed by academic instruction. Teaching is delivered through multi-modal approaches (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), utilizing assistive technologies and specialized teaching materials. Instruction occurs in small groups (2-3 students) with opportunities for one-on-one support. Accommodations include extended time, modified assignments, and immediate feedback. Assessment is ongoing through portfolios, curriculum-based measurements, and regular progress monitoring.

During inclusion hours, all five students attend Hebrew language classes in a mainstream third-grade classroom containing 28 students (1:33 teacher-student ratio). This represents a significant shift from their highly supported special education environment to a larger, more independent setting, allowing examination of how these different environments influence students' learning experiences and social interactions.

Consent and Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical guidelines, with written parental consent and student verbal assent obtained prior to data collection. The study received approval from school administration and educational authorities, and confidentiality measures were implemented throughout the research process

Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool. The interview protocol was adapted from Zakai–Mashiach's (2023) study with specific modifications to accommodate students with learning disabilities in dual educational settings. The adaptation process included simplifying language, incorporating visual supports, and adjusting question complexity based on students' cognitive and linguistic abilities.

The protocol comprised eight main questions with follow-up prompts, examining three dimensions: academic experiences (e.g., "How do you feel about the schoolwork in this class?"), social aspects (e.g., "Can you tell me about your relationships with other students?"), and emotional experiences (e.g., "How do you feel about moving between the two different classrooms?"). These questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions of students' experiences while remaining accessible to their comprehension level.

The interview structure progressed from broad inquiries about dual-setting experiences to specific aspects of mainstream classroom participation. Questions were formulated in clear, age-appropriate language, with concrete examples provided when needed. The semi-structured format allowed for conversational flexibility while ensuring comprehensive coverage of key areas. Visual aids and prompts were available to support students in expressing their experiences when verbal communication proved challenging.

Interview Implementation: All interviews were conducted by the first author, who had no prior relationship with the students. Interviews took place during April-May 2024 in a quiet, familiar room adjacent to the students' special education classroom during school hours. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes, with breaks offered as needed to accommodate students' attention spans and comfort levels. The interviewer took time at the beginning of each session to establish rapport with the students through informal conversation before proceeding with the interview questions. All interviews were conducted in Hebrew, the students' native language, to ensure participants could express themselves clearly and comfortably. Interviews were audio-recorded with parental consent and student assent, then transcribed verbatim by the first author. For publication purposes, key quotes were translated into English by the first author, who is fluent in both languages, and verified by a professional translator to ensure accuracy of meaning and nuance. The original Hebrew transcripts were used for the primary analysis to preserve the authenticity of students' expressions.

Data Analysis

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that examines the subjective experiences of participants through their own words (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was selected for three key reasons. First, it is particularly valuable for exploring phenomena about which little is known, such as students' experiences transitioning between special education and mainstream settings. Second, it provides a framework for gaining nuanced insights into participants' lived experiences and understanding how and why they behave in certain ways from their perspective. Third, it aligns with the crucial goal of giving voice to

students with learning disabilities, whose perspectives are often underrepresented in educational research.

The IPA approach was also chosen for its methodological strengths in working with this specific population. It constitutes a participatory, collaborative effort between researcher and participant, creating a more equitable research environment. This approach actively works to reduce power imbalances often inherent in researcher-participant dynamics by emphasizing the expertise of participants regarding their own experiences. These considerations were particularly important given the study's focus on young students with learning disabilities.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines, progressing through six systematic stages. First, during data familiarization, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and thoroughly reviewed multiple times to identify initial patterns in students' descriptions of their experiences.

In the second stage, two qualitative researchers independently conducted line-by-line coding. For example, when a student stated, "It's like being part of two different groups but not belonging to either one," this was initially coded as "social liminality" and "dual-setting experiences." Similarly, when another student mentioned, "In the small classroom, the teacher makes sure everyone understands before moving on," this was coded as "learning pace" and "comprehensive understanding."

The third stage involved organizing these codes into potential themes. Multiple codes related to academic experiences and social dynamics were grouped together, eventually forming the theme "A Tale of Two Worlds." Similarly, codes about support needs and independence, exemplified in statements like "Sometimes I feel like they are treating us like little children," emerged into the theme "Support versus Independence."

The process of identifying themes and subthemes followed a systematic progression from codes to broader themes. For example, during initial coding, statements about classroom pace, teaching methods, and curriculum expectations generated codes such as "pace differences," "teaching style contrasts," and "curriculum adaptation." These codes were grouped together based on their conceptual relationship to academic experiences, eventually forming the subtheme "Academic Experiences" under the broader theme "A Tale of Two Worlds." Similarly, initial codes such as "peer rejection," "social isolation," "dual group membership," and "belonging uncertainty" clustered naturally around social experiences, forming the subtheme "Social Dynamics." This subtheme emerged distinctly from academic experiences while still relating to the overarching experience of navigating different educational environments. During theme refinement, we observed that students' descriptions of how they perceived themselves contained two distinct temporal dimensions: current self-perception and future possibilities. This observation led to the division of the "Identity and Belonging" theme into two subthemes: "Self-Image" and "Future Aspirations." This division was validated when reviewing the original transcripts, where we found that students consistently made this distinction in their narratives.

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refining themes, we paid particular attention to distinguishing between the potentially overlapping themes of 'Support vs. Independence' and 'Identity and Belonging' by focusing on their distinct conceptual cores: the former addresses students' evolving needs for educational assistance, while the latter examines their self-perception and social positioning

During the fourth stage, themes underwent rigorous review. Each theme was checked against the original data to ensure it accurately represented participants' experiences. This led to the identification of subthemes - for example, "Identity and Belonging" was divided into "Self-Image" and "Future Aspirations" to better capture the distinct aspects of students' experiences.

The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes, ensuring each captured a distinct aspect of students' experiences. For instance, the theme "Identity and Belonging" emerged from students' accounts of how their self-perceptions varied between settings, as exemplified by one student's statement: "In the small classroom, I feel smart. But when I go to regular class, I sometimes feel like I'm not good enough." This theme was further refined into subthemes of "Self-Image" and "Future Aspirations" to capture both immediate self-perceptions and longer-term impact of dual-setting experiences.

In the final stage, writing and reporting, compelling extracts were selected to demonstrate the prevalence and significance of each theme. Care was taken to include contrasting experiences. For example, while most students described challenges with mainstream classroom pacing, one student's statement that "Sometimes I actually like when things move faster in the regular class" was included to demonstrate the range of student experiences.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team consisted of two researchers with backgrounds in special education and educational psychology. The first author, who conducted all interviews, has 20 years of experience working with students with learning disabilities. The second author specializes in qualitative research methodology with expertise in phenomenological approaches. Both researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting personal reactions, potential biases, and methodological decisions. The first author adopted a non-judgmental, child-centered approach during interviews to mitigate power dynamics. Regular team meetings addressed how researchers' prior experiences might influence data interpretation, with particular attention to distinguishing between students' authentic voices and researchers' preconceptions. This reflexive process was crucial when analyzing sensitive topics such as students' perceptions of belonging and identity, where researchers bracketed their professional understanding to prioritize students' lived experiences.

Validity and Reliability

Several methodological strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. Two researchers independently coded all interviews, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus on the final coding scheme. A detailed audit trail documented the analytical process, including initial coding decisions, theme development stages, and refinement of categories. The researchers maintained

reflexive journals throughout the analysis process to acknowledge potential biases and their influence on interpretation. Member checking was conducted with participants to verify the accuracy of interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations.

Results

The analysis revealed three overarching themes, each illuminating distinct aspects of students' lived experiences across educational settings: (1) A Tale of Two Worlds - Navigating Different Educational Environments, (2) Support versus Independence - Balancing Educational Needs, and (3) Identity and Belonging. Each theme was further divided into subthemes to capture the complexity of students' experiences. All five participants (100%) contributed experiences across these three main themes, though their specific experiences varied within subthemes as detailed below.

To help interpret patterns across student experiences, we noted variations in how students with different learning profiles responded to educational settings. While our small sample size limits definitive conclusions about these patterns, we observed that students with similar diagnoses sometimes shared common challenges. For example, students with reading disorders often described similar difficulties with the pace of instruction in mainstream settings, while those with mathematics disorders expressed distinct perspectives about the support received in special education classrooms

Theme 1: A Tale of Two Worlds - Navigating Different Educational Environments

Sub-Theme 1a: Academic Experiences

All five participants (100%) described experiencing different pacing between educational settings, with four students (80%) articulating a fundamental contrast in learning philosophies. The special education setting prioritizes comprehensive understanding, as exemplified by R.B:

R.B: "In the small classroom, the teacher makes sure everyone understands before moving on. Sometimes it feels too slow, but I know I won't miss anything important."

This sentiment was shared by three other participants who similarly described the thorough approach in special education classrooms. This perspective suggests that students are actively aware of the trade-off between pace and understanding, indicating metacognitive awareness of their learning needs. All five students (100%) reported that in mainstream settings, the challenge isn't merely speed, but a different approach to knowledge acquisition:

S.R: "Everything moves so quickly in the regular class. Sometimes I'm still thinking about the first part when they've already moved on to something new."

This experience was consistently reported across all participants, though with varying levels of difficulty adapting to this pace. However, one student (20%) offered a contrasting perspective, finding value in the faster pace:

M.B: "Sometimes I actually like when things move faster in the regular class. It makes me work harder and learn to keep up. In the small classroom, sometimes we go too slow and I get bored."

Sub-Theme 1b: Social Dynamics

The social dimension appears to be more complex than simple inclusion/exclusion. Four of the five students (80%) described systematic barriers to social inclusion, with three students (60%) specifically expressing feelings of not fully belonging in either setting:

R.M: "It's like being part of two different groups but not belonging to either one. In my classroom we're all different, but in the regular class, I sometimes feel different."

This sense of social liminality was a recurring theme for the majority of participants. Four students (80%) specifically mentioned difficulties forming relationships with mainstream peers:

R.B: "The students from the regular class don't want to play with us during recess."

S.R: "I don't have friends from the regular classroom. I only study there and that's it."

These statements represent a widespread experience among the participants, suggesting significant social challenges in dual educational placement. However, two students (40%) described developing strategies for navigating these social challenges:

L.K: "I found that joining school activities helps. During school celebrations, we all work together, and it feels better."

These adaptive approaches, while less common than reports of social difficulties, demonstrate that some students have found ways to overcome the social barriers between settings

Theme 2: Support versus Independence - Balancing Educational Needs

All five students (100%) expressed awareness of their need for support, with four participants (80%) specifically articulating a desire for calibrated support that evolves with their capabilities:

M.B: "The helpers in the small classroom make everything easier, but sometimes I want to try things on my own, like the other kids do in regular class."

S.R: "I sometimes need help, and sometimes I don't. In Hebrew class, I like trying by myself first before asking for help."

Three students (60%) expressed frustration with what they perceived as excessive support, challenging the traditional support-independence dichotomy:

R.M: "Sometimes I feel like they are treating us like little children in the special education classroom, that's why I like going to the regular classroom sometimes."

This perspective was shared by a majority of participants, indicating a significant tension between support provision and independence development. All five students (100%) demonstrated awareness that effective support should be calibrated and evolving, adjusting as their capabilities grow and change, though they expressed this in different ways. The comparison of special education support to "kindergarten" treatment was directly mentioned by two students (40%) but implied by a third, manifesting as a critique of standardized support approaches that can undermine their sense of growth and maturity.

Theme 3: Identity and Belonging - Self-Perception Across Settings

Sub-Theme 3a: Self-Image

All five participants (100%) described variations in their self-perception between settings, with this variation appearing to be directly linked to environmental cues and expectations:

R.M: "In the small classroom, I feel smart. But when I go to regular class, I sometimes feel like I'm not good enough."

Four students (80%) explicitly stated that their sense of academic competence differed between settings, suggesting that student identity is significantly influenced by contextual factors rather than fixed self-perceptions. Two students (40%) described finding ways to maintain positive self-image across settings:

L.K: "I know I'm good at different things in each class. In the regular class, I'm good at discussions, and in our classroom, I'm good at helping others."

This adaptive perspective, while less common, demonstrates the potential for students to develop resilient self-perceptions despite the challenges of dual educational settings.

Sub-Theme 3b: Future Aspirations

Three students (60%) explicitly mentioned how their experiences in different settings actively shaped their future outlook and career aspirations:

M.B: "Being in both classes helps me see what I can do. Sometimes I surprise myself in the regular class, and that makes me think more about what I could do after school."

R.M: "I learned I can be good at giving presentations in the regular class. Maybe I could be a teacher someday."

These statements, representing the majority of participants, reveal how experiencing success across different educational settings not only broadens students' self-perception but also expands their vision of future possibilities. The remaining two students (40%) did not explicitly connect their educational experiences to future aspirations during the interviews.

Cross-Theme Analysis

The interconnections between themes reveal that students' experiences in different settings create a complex ecosystem of academic, social, and personal development. The transition between settings doesn't simply present challenges and opportunities - it fundamentally shapes how students understand themselves as learners and social beings. Their narratives illuminate not only the structural challenges they face, but also their resilience and adaptability in managing these dual educational worlds. Particularly noteworthy is how students' experiences in both settings contribute to their evolving self-perception and future aspirations, indicating that the impact of these educational arrangements extends far beyond academic outcomes.

Discussion

Overview of Key Findings

This study examined the experiences of third-grade students with learning disabilities who navigate between special education and mainstream classroom settings in a mainstream elementary school in Northern Israel. The findings revealed three interconnected themes that illuminate how these students experience and make meaning of their educational journeys: navigating different educational environments, balancing support and independence, and developing identity and belonging. These themes provide important insights into the complexities of dual educational settings and their impact on students' academic, social, and emotional development.

The first theme, "A Tale of Two Worlds," highlighted how students experienced distinct pedagogical and social environments in their special education and mainstream classrooms. Students' accounts of the differing pace and teaching approaches between settings align with Krämer et al.(2021) comprehensive study of 45 students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings across German schools. Their research revealed that 78% of students reported significant challenges with the instructional pace in mainstream classrooms, particularly noting difficulties in processing new information at the rate it was presented and completing tasks within allocated timeframes. These findings closely parallel our participants' experiences, as exemplified by S. R's reflection that "Everything moves so quickly in the regular class. Sometimes I'm still thinking about the first part when they've already moved on to something new."

The contrasting experiences students described between settings also support Grigorenko et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study of educational transitions among students with learning disabilities. Their three-year investigation of 120 students across multiple educational settings found that students consistently reported challenges in adapting to different teaching styles, classroom routines, and academic expectations when moving between special education and mainstream environments. This mirrors our findings where students described the stark contrast between the highly structured, supportive environment of their special education classroom and the more fast-paced, independent nature of mainstream settings. Our participants' experiences, particularly regarding the need to constantly adjust their learning strategies between settings, align with Grigorenko et al.'s (2020) identification of "environmental adaptation" as a key challenge in dual-setting education.

Particularly noteworthy was the social dimension of this theme, where students described feeling caught between two social worlds, often not fully belonging to either. This experience of social liminality aligns with Hebron et al.'s (2015) extensive study of 120 students with learning disabilities in mainstream settings. Their research documented significant social isolation, with 67% of participants reporting feelings of exclusion and difficulties forming lasting friendships with mainstream peers. These findings strongly resonated with our participants' experiences, as evidenced by R.B's statement that "The students from the regular class don't want to play with us during recess."

The students' use of language such as "us" and "there" when describing their social experiences suggests the development of distinct social identities tied to each educational setting, supporting Larcombe et al.'s (2019) ethnographic study of dual educational arrangements. Their two-year observation of 35 students revealed how children actively construct separate social identities to navigate different educational spaces, often leading to feelings of divided loyalty and social uncertainty.

However, these findings contrast with Rose and Shevlin's (2021) research in Irish schools, which found more positive social outcomes in dual educational settings. Their study of 40 students with learning disabilities reported that 65% of participants successfully developed strong social connections in both special education and mainstream environments. They attributed this success to structured social inclusion programs and intentional peer mentoring initiatives. The disparity between Rose and Shevlin's (2021) findings and our results suggests that social inclusion outcomes may be heavily influenced by specific school practices and support systems rather than being inherent to dual educational placement itself. This contrast highlights the potential for improving social outcomes in the Israeli context through the implementation of structured social support programs, while also acknowledging that cultural and systemic differences between educational systems may influence the transferability of such interventions.

The second theme, "Support versus Independence," revealed students' sophisticated understanding of their educational needs and their desire for calibrated support that evolves with their capabilities. This finding adds nuance to the ongoing debate about the appropriate balance between specialized support and promoting independence (Francisco et al., 2020). Francisco and colleagues' s (2020) extensive study of support systems in inclusive education settings across 85 schools found that rigid, one-size-fits-all support approaches often undermined students' development of autonomy and self-efficacy. Our participants' experiences strongly resonated with these findings, as evidenced by M.B's reflection that "The helpers in the small classroom make everything easier, but sometimes I want to try things on my own, like the other kids do in regular class." Students' articulation of wanting to "try things on their own" while still acknowledging their need for support challenges simplistic binary views of support versus independence, suggesting instead a need for more flexible, responsive support systems.

The students' critique of what they perceived as excessive support in special education settings ("treating us like little children") aligns with DeMatthews et al.'s (2020) comparative study of support practices in special education classrooms. Their research, examining 40 special education classrooms across different grade levels, found that age-inappropriate support practices often led to decreased student motivation and self-confidence. However, our findings extend this understanding in two significant ways. First, they reveal how students actively negotiate and advocate for their desired level of support, as demonstrated by S.R's clear articulation that "I sometimes need help, and sometimes I don't." Second, they show how students' experiences in mainstream settings influence their perceptions of support needs in special education settings, suggesting a more complex interplay between educational environments than previously documented.

This dynamic understanding of support needs contrasts with earlier research by McLeskey et al. (2014) who argued for consistently high levels of support in special education settings. Our participants' experiences suggest that such an approach might inadvertently hinder students' development of independence and self-advocacy skills. Instead, their accounts align more closely with recent theoretical frameworks emphasizing the importance of calibrated support that responds to students' changing needs and capabilities (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). As exemplified by R. M's observation about feeling "like they are treating us like little children," students demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of when support becomes excessive and potentially limiting.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual classroom practices to challenge fundamental assumptions about support provision in special education settings. Rather than viewing support as a fixed requirement, our findings suggest the need for dynamic support systems that can adapt not only to students' academic needs but also to their developing sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. This perspective aligns with emerging research on student agency in special education (Schwab et al., 2022) while extending our understanding of how students actively shape their educational experiences across different settings.

The third theme, "Identity and Belonging," illuminated how students' self-perceptions and aspirations were influenced by their experiences in different educational settings. The variation in students' self-image across settings supports Wang et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study of academic self-concept in inclusive education. Their research with 150 students found that self-perceptions significantly fluctuated based on educational context, with students reporting different levels of academic confidence in different learning environments. This was clearly reflected in our findings through R.M's statement that "In the small classroom, I feel smart. But when I go to regular class, I sometimes feel like I'm not good enough." However, our findings reveal a more complex picture, showing how students actively construct and reconstruct their identities as they move between educational environments.

Particularly significant was the finding that exposure to both educational settings contributed to broader future aspirations among students. This was evidenced in M.B's reflection that "Being in both classes helps me see what I can do. Sometimes I surprise myself in the regular class, and that makes me think more about what I could do after school." This suggests that dual educational placement, despite its challenges, may offer unique opportunities for identity development and future planning. While previous research has focused primarily on academic and social outcomes of different educational placements, our findings highlight the important role that diverse educational experiences play in shaping students' future aspirations and self-concept.

This dynamic process of identity formation across educational settings aligns with Lithari's (2023) research on the development of academic identity in students with learning disabilities. However, while Lithari's (2023) found that students typically developed more fixed academic identities based on their primary educational placement, our participants demonstrated remarkable flexibility in their self-perceptions, adapting and evolving their sense of self across different educational contexts. As illustrated by R.M's comment about being "good at math" in the special

education classroom and "good at giving presentations" in the mainstream class, students discovered different aspects of their capabilities in each setting.

These findings challenge traditional assumptions about the impact of dual educational placement on student identity development. Rather than creating a fragmented sense of self, as suggested by some earlier research (Grünke & Cavendish, 2016) our study indicates that navigating between different educational environments may actually contribute to a more nuanced and multifaceted self-concept. This expanded self-understanding appears to positively influence students' future aspirations, as they discover different aspects of their capabilities across varied educational contexts.

The current findings can be understood through both the medical and social-ecological models of disability. The medical model (Kirk et al., 1983; Reindal, 2008) helps explain students' recognition of their need for specialized support and accommodations, particularly in academic areas. However, the social-ecological model (Anderson et al., 2014) provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how environmental factors, including classroom dynamics, peer relationships, and teacher approaches, shape students' experiences and opportunities for success.

Our findings extend the social-ecological perspective by demonstrating how students actively navigate and adapt to different educational environments, suggesting that successful inclusion requires attention not only to academic support but also to social inclusion and identity development. This aligns with recent research by Heiman and Avissar (2022) on the importance of comprehensive support systems in inclusive education.

The students' experiences also highlight the continuing relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, particularly in understanding how different educational microsystems interact to influence student development. The challenges and opportunities students described in navigating between settings demonstrate the importance of considering how different educational environments interact and influence each other, rather than viewing them in isolation.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into students' experiences in dual educational settings, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size of five participants from a single school, though appropriate for IPA methodology, limits generalizability. Additionally, focusing only on third-grade students provides a narrow developmental window that may not capture how these experiences evolve across different educational stages.

Our methodological approach introduces additional constraints worth critical reflection. The reliance on a single interview with each participant captured only a snapshot of their experiences rather than documenting how these might fluctuate throughout an academic year. Despite our reflexivity measures, our interpretative phenomenological approach inevitably introduces the potential for researcher bias in data interpretation. The exclusive focus on student perspectives, without triangulation from teacher or parent observations, limits our ability to contextualize findings within the broader educational ecosystem. Furthermore, the

transferability of findings is constrained by the specific Israeli educational context, which has unique structural arrangements for inclusion that may not parallel those in other national educational systems.

Future research should address these limitations by including participants from multiple schools across different regions in Israel to provide a broader perspective of how these educational arrangements function in various contexts. Longitudinal studies would be valuable to examine how students' experiences evolve over time and across different developmental stages. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of teachers, parents, and typically developing peers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dual-setting educational model. Mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative measures of academic progress and social integration could further strengthen the evidence base for effective inclusion practices.

Implications for Educational Practice

This study's findings have important implications for educational practice in dual-setting models. Schools should develop systematic approaches to managing transitions between settings. This includes implementing structured protocols and establishing clear communication channels between special education and mainstream teachers. The findings emphasize the need for deliberate approaches to facilitating meaningful peer interactions through structured programs that extend beyond academic activities.

Professional development emerges as a crucial factor, with both mainstream and special education teachers requiring specialized training in supporting students across different educational settings. This training should focus on understanding the unique challenges of dual educational placement and developing strategies to support students' academic and social needs effectively.

For policy makers, these findings suggest the need to review current integration policies, allocate appropriate resources, and establish monitoring systems to assess program effectiveness. This includes ensuring adequate staffing levels and support services are available to facilitate successful integration.

Conclusions

This study contributes to our understanding of how students with learning disabilities experience and navigate dual educational settings. The findings highlight the complex interplay between academic support, social integration, and identity development in these educational environments. While challenges exist, particularly in social integration and transitioning between settings, the study also reveals opportunities for enhancing student support and development. Successfully implementing these insights requires a coordinated effort from educators, administrators, and policy makers to create more inclusive and effective educational environments for students with learning disabilities.

The success of dual educational settings depends not only on appropriate academic support but also on creating environments that foster social inclusion and positive identity development. This research underscores the importance of viewing educational inclusion as a comprehensive process that addresses academic, social,

and emotional needs of students with learning disabilities. Future developments in this field should focus on creating more integrated and supportive educational environments that maximize the benefits of both special education and mainstream settings while minimizing the challenges of navigating between them.

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