**An Educational Approach to At-Risk Youth as “Special Needs” Students Lacking Family Resources: Implementation and Implications**

**Abstract**

The present study examines the implications of a pedagogical approach that views at-risk children as “special needs” students lacking family resources, which thus limits their future educational and employment prospects. Accordingly, this approach suggests that the unique needs of this population be deliberately addressed. The research considers a case study conducted at an elementary school in Israel that includes at-risk children in its student population and which follows the proposed pedagogical approach. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 students identified as being at risk, and 15 members of the teaching staff. Secondary research tools consisted of observations and document collection. The findings were analyzed according to a case study approach based on qualitative-phenomenological methodology. Two main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) differential responses to basic and optimal needs; (2) needs-supportive pedagogy. The findings demonstrate that the school adopts an intentional pedagogical orientation that seeks to address at-risk students’ lack of parental and home functionality as a prerequisite for learning; this appears to be the case even though the educational organization is not explicitly aware of this as its role. The implications of this approach are also explored from the perspective of the study participants. They described the educational environment as a “second home,” which provides for at-risk students’ basic and optimal family needs, and fosters the students’ ability to successfully adapt and develop through cultivating a sense of belonging, empowerment, and self-worth. From a theoretical standpoint, this study presents a distinctive pedagogical concept that enhances knowledge of school-based educational interventions for at-risk students. From a practical standpoint, this study presents a suitable organizational model that can be studied and applied in similar educational systems.

**Introduction**

In liberal democratic societies, one stated goal of the education system is to weaken the persistent correlation between low socioeconomic status and achievement, thereby giving all students the fundamental right to educational opportunities. Accordingly, these education systems try to compensate disadvantaged members of society for their lack of resources, and strive to achieve equal opportunity and social mobility through affirmative action and by providing compensational and nurturing education (Erhard, 2008; Sriprakash, Proctor, & Hu, 2016). Such education systems explicitly state that they intend to meet the special needs of at-risk students. They do so by expanding the commitment and responsibility of educational frameworks to develop tailored interventions for such students. The role of the school as a social institution is, among other things, to increase the opportunities for these children to learn and develop into independently functioning adults. Educational systems attempt to break the cycle of academic failure by promoting personal and social adaptation, reducing educational achievement gaps, and providing resources for social mobility (Dovrat, 2005; Israeli Knesset, 2002; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley & Weatherby-Fell, 2016; Schmid, 2006). Accordingly, frameworks have been created to provide such solutions. For example, welfare offices are responsible for implementing programs such as neighborhood rehabilitation and supplementary education programs, and offering external supervision and enrichment programs for teachers and students, in order to expand knowledge in this area.

However, laws in Israel and other countries do not yet formally recognize at-risk children and youth as a population with special needs who are entitled to appropriate treatment as such. Israel’s Special Education Law (Ministry of Education, 1988) defines special needs students as those between the ages of 3-21 who have physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities, such as learning disabilities, hearing and speech impairments, or complex disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. Accordingly, Israel’s Inclusion in Education Law, which establishes students’ eligibility to receive support to attend “regular” schools, only addresses the needs of students defined in the Special Education Act. In other words, despite their special characteristics and needs, at-risk children and youth are not recognized by the educational system as legally entitled to receive the educational or therapeutic response they require, solely because they have been defined as being at risk. Such support could include diagnoses, para-medical treatments, emotional therapies, guidance for parents and supplementary help with their studies. Thus, despite research on the subject and despite the existing awareness of the issue, recommendations, and action plans regarding at-risk students, the education system does not have a well-established pedagogical policy for at-risk children.

**At-risk Children**

At-risk children are those live in a family and social environment that poses risks to them (Fraser, 1997; Garbarino, 1995). Their personal, familial, and environmental backgrounds can be characterized as problematic and complex, exposing the children to a variety of negative experiences. As a result, these children are impaired in the following areas: physical existence and development; family belonging and social belonging; ability to learn and acquire skills; well-being and psychological health; and protection from their own dangerous behaviors and those of others (Schmidt, 2006). They are at high risk of dropout, delinquency, and psychopathology (Borkar, 2016; Lahav, 2000). At-risk students receive little support at home that would give them normative values or the presence of role models. They live in a state of threat and danger and are continually engaged in having their basic needs met, due to their deprivations. Their living conditions do not allow them to have the beneficial experiences, positive feelings, or optimal mental well-being that would offer fertile ground for growth, development of abilities, motivation, and positive orientation towards others. Thus, the majority of at-risk children exhibit a variety of emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties that can cause maladjustment and dysfunction at school. This may be manifest in emotional disorders, difficulty in controlling anger, guilt, and anxiety, a negative self-image, low self-esteem, low regard for others, and social isolation (Knesset, 2002).

Another factor used to define students’ level of risk is related to the phenomenon of dropping out of school. School dropout may be described along a spectrum from “hidden” dropout to “visible” dropout. Hidden dropout refers to students who are often absent from the education system or are passively present in the classroom but are not active participants in learning. This creates gaps in knowledge and acquired learning skills, which lead to a process of gradual disconnection from the school. Visible dropout refers to students who completely leave the school system (Apple, 2017; Cohen-Navot, Elenbogen-Perkowitz, & Rienfeld, 2001; Dovrat, 2005). According to the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) (2005), children and youth who are unable to adapt to school have a low probability of fully and actively integrating into society later on.

Previous studies have found that a school’s culture, climate, and responses are strongly correlated with adjustment difficulties among at-risk youth, including frequent absenteeism, alienation from school, social problems, feelings of social rejection, falling victim to violence, expressing violent behavior, and delinquency (Anderson, Allen & Jenkins, 2016; Lahav, 2000). A study examining the relationship between the level of positive social connection and delinquency among 2445 students found that the greater the sense of alienation, the greater the delinquent behaviors (Yuksek & Solakoglu, 2016). However, a learning environment that facilitates positive experiences can positively affect the development and flourishing of at-risk students facing difficulties, increasing their sensitivity to responses and supportive relationships in their social environment (Bao, Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2015; Lahav, 2000; Levinson & Jacob, 1993).

Another aspect that significantly influences delinquent behaviors and achievement is students’ perceptions of the extent to which the school is fulfilling their basic and optimal needs. If students feel their needs are not being met, their perceptions of the school will be negative, leading to negative pathological behaviors and violence (Harel, 1999). Assor, Kaplan, and Roth (2001) examined students’ perceptions of teacher support regarding three types of needs: belonging and security, a sense of efficacy, and the need for autonomy. Students’ self-reports indicated that teacher support promoted intrinsic motivation for learning, positive emotions, and achievement. Another study by Assor and Kaplan (2001) based on teachers’ reports found that a supportive and inclusive educational environment predicted learning achievement and students’ investment in learning (Hanley et al., 2015; Peretz-Sasson, 1998).

The present study offers a distinctive theoretical framework and practical pedagogical approach in which at-risk children are viewed as a special needs population. This is based on the premise that although at-risk children do not have deficiencies of organic physical origins, they lack family resources and therefore need to have their special needs met as a prerequisite for learning. These include basic and optimal psychological needs such as confidence, a sense of belonging, love, and self-esteem. This study focuses on a test study of a targeted school model consistent with the perception of at-risk children as having special educational needs. Thus, it suggests an approach that provides differential responses to their needs, and individual and organizational processes to help them develop and progress (discussed in detail below). Specifically, the study examined the applications, implications, and perceptions of this pedagogical approach among staff and students.

**Methodology**

**Research Method**

 This case study was conducted according to a qualitative-phenomenological methodology. This allows for examination of real-world situations without the conditions of control and supervision over the processes. This comprehensive, rich, and in-depth method is suitable for examination of educational systems (Patton, 1990). Researchers are present at the research site not as neutral observers, but as people with practical and professional knowledge of the subject under investigation. This knowledge influences the researchers’ perceptions of the observed phenomena and their interpretations of the issues (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 1995).

In the professional literature, there is agreement regarding two main objectives of qualitative-educational research. The first is to shed light on human behavior by expanding upon a theoretical model that can contribute to knowledge and research, potentially offering high-quality and beneficial results. The second agreed-upon objective is that study and research on cultural issues should assist decision makers, for example regarding actions that schools undertake to create an environment that is positive for at-risk students (Jackson, 1990).

**Study Setting**

The current study took place at the Weizmann State Elementary School in Herzliya, Israel. The at-risk children learning at this school include: new immigrants, children from families suffering deprivation and poverty, children living at battered women’s shelters, children in foster care, and children whose parents are foreign workers, prisoners, addicts, or who struggle with mental illness. This school also has students with various special needs, some of whom are integrated into regular classrooms, while others learn in separate designated classes. As noted earlier, this school was chosen as a case study for this research because it operates according to a distinct pedagogical approach aimed at fulfilling students’ differential needs by expanding the perceived responsibilities of the school and its staff members. The school initiated individualized and organizational processes to assist these students’ advancement. It also offers enrichment and development activities for faculty members. It creates a nurturing environment and fosters relationships with parents and the school community. This school received the President’s Award for Advanced Pedagogy for its work, particularly its integration of students with special needs.

**Study Participants**

The study participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent two study populations: staff and students. The study population consisted of a total of 30 participants. Fifteen were staff members holding various roles: the school principal, the school guidance counselor, six homeroom teachers in different grades, two teachers of specialized subjects, and five holding other positions: assistant teacher, community liaison, training coordinator, special education coordinator, and administrator.

The second group of participants included fifteen students identified as having characteristics of at-risk children: children living in battered women’s shelters, new immigrants, children living in a dormitory for at-risk youth, children in a class for those with emotional difficulties, children suffering from financial distress, and more.

**Research Tools**

The primary research tool was a semi-structured in-depth interview, written and adapted for each group of participants. Interviews were based off of a structured open-ended interview guide, with topics related to the study’s objectives. The formulation of the questions and their order was not predetermined (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 1995). The interviews were conducted in a flexible manner, so that each interviewee could choose to focus and expand upon particular topics. Thus, the narratives emerged from interviewees’ personal perspectives, based on the meanings they attributed to their own experiences (Shakedi, 2003).

The secondary research tools were observations of study participants and the collection of personal and organizational documents. Participant observations were conducted during various school activities such as plenary sessions, training sessions, professional staff meetings, classes, integration activities, recess and breaks, parent meetings, and parental supervision sessions. The study also made use of personal and organizational documents relevant to understanding the topic of study. Documents included meeting protocols, students’ personal files, letters of assessment, data on school effectiveness, and metrics of school efficiency and growth. These documents expanded the database and assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

**Research Procedure**

Prior authorization was obtained from the Office of the Chief Scientist and from the students’ parents. The research sample was determined by the first author, in consultation with the administrative staff. This was done in such a way as to yield potential interviewees who had a wide range of perspectives, cultural backgrounds, who were motivated to participate in the study. The location of the interview was determined according to convenience for each participant. Each interview session began by presenting and explaining the purpose of the research. Participants signed informed consent forms, which explained the research process and assured them that the research complied with rules of ethics and confidentiality. The interviews were recorded and annotated by hand. Later, the transcripts were entered into a computer. Other data, collected via observations of participants and the aforementioned documents, were recorded as protocols or as detailed field notes to which comments and explanations were added.

**Data Analysis**

The raw data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify primary themes in the findings. This approach enables researchers to assess the participants’ worldviews and knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). This type of analysis is based on an integrative method, which allows researchers to maintain the scientific and systematic nature of the study, while taking into account each participant’s unique experience (Shakedi, 2003). Accordingly, the current study uses the content analysis model proposed by Shakedi (2003) for identifying themes and “super categories,” arranging these categories into story lines, and writing the research report.

**Validity, Reliability, and Prevention of Bias**

Given that the principal investigator is a former staff member of the case study school, questions regarding her involvement as an “insider” researcher were raised. Therefore, to achieve a high level of internal validity and reliability, several processes were undertaken: all researchers spent an extended period of over ten months in the study setting; triangulation; interviews with two groups of participants having diverse characteristics; and use of observations and document analysis as secondary research tools. In addition, during interviews, participants were asked to address difficult matters, to allow them to critique the researcher’s prior and underlying research assumptions. The findings were shown to respondents, and they were given the opportunity to correct or re-articulate the presented data. In the final stage of the discussion, participants were provided with a written copy of the findings.

The second author served as an external reader during the collection and analysis of the data. Other actions that aided in bias prevention were the documentation and retention of internal and external documents, recording and transcription of interviews, taking notes at the time of the observations, and more.

**Professional Ethics**

The study received the approval of Bar-Ilan University’s institutional committee and the Chief Scientist from Israel’s Ministry of Education. Data collection was conducted with sensitivity, maintaining boundaries, confidentiality, informed consent, and adhering to all required rules of ethics.

**Results**

The study findings were related to the distinctive pedagogical approach at the selected school, the practical applications of this approach, and its implications. The main findings from the interviews and secondary research tools are organized according to two primary themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) differential response to basic and optimal needs and (2) a needs-supportive pedagogical approach.

**Differential Response to Basic and Optimal Needs**

The findings revealed that the educational team places a central value on empathic responses to the needs of at-risk children and attributes great importance to providing them with a safe environment, as a response to their deprivations in the family realm. Specifically, they address students’ basic physiological needs such as security, belonging, and love, as well as more complex needs (hereafter, referred to as optimal needs) such as respect, appreciation, and self-actualization. This is achieved through giving the children acceptance and support, expressing faith in them, and engaging in collaborative dialogue and empowering processes.

Despite the challenges associated with at-risk children and with their lack of resources, this school accepts at-risk students from across the city of Herzliya, even when it is not required to do so. The team is guided by a principle of inclusiveness. They assure the children that everyone has a place at the school, and that “first of all you belong with us; afterwards we’ll see who you are and what you need.” As the school principal explained:

I’m not going to give up on them. In the end, this stubbornness about at-risk children is part of a whole package, along with other things, that brings out something humane in the staff and the other kids. Some call our school an urban garbage can. I refer to it as a city of refuge. It depends on the associated ideology. If I throw my garbage somewhere else, will it absolve me of responsibility? The responsibility for the child is ours.

The interviews revealed sensitivity, concern, and caring about the children’s situations. Staff members pay attention to the children’s facial expressions and eyes, notice if they are yawning or coming late in the morning. This empathic attitude is reflected in concern and actual responses to primary needs such as security, food, clothing, or health care. The children’s needs for physical security receive special responses in the form of a consistent plan for safety and security. Clear boundaries are set for the elimination of negative behaviors, including dialogue that allows students to reflect on their aggressive behavior, and to learn positive ways of acting. The teachers described their concern for these children’s needs as that of a “loving chaperone.” They explained this as giving the children unconditional acceptance, expressing faith in them, and having the desire to do as much as possible to help them. Some interviewees described having feelings of parental love for the children. Such an attitude has been reported as imperative for at-risk children by allowing them to feel important to the teacher, to believe that there is good in the world, and to see that there are people who want to help them and who care about them. The staff members see these feelings as necessary to enable processes of change in the children.

This view was reinforced in the students’ interviews. They expressed gratitude for the staff members’ caring attitude towards them, and for giving them a sense of belonging and confidence.

They’re like a father and mother. There is someone to worry about me, to give me advice or solutions. When my mother died, the school took care of me. I feel that people at this school love me. (Nathaniel)

There [at another school] they gave up on me right away, they told me to get out of the school. This is the best school I have been to. The teachers and the kids in the class treat you well, even if you don’t take your medication. Here, they understand you and don’t say “Go home.” (Yaniv)

These emotions arose, in part, as a result of ongoing personal dialogues between the students and a significant adult figure. Such dialogue is viewed as a professional tool that allows teachers to track changes and identify needs as the children are confronted with the realities of their lives. One homeroom teacher, Judith, described it this way:

I had a student who was debating whether to leave his dormitory and return home. I asked him if he wanted to share this decision with the class, and he agreed. Pros and cons were presented - what are the good things about the dormitory, and what things are less good. He said, “In the dormitory, I don’t hear from my parents much.” The other students reacted to this statement and offered suggestions. Then, the teaching staff expressed our opinion. At the end of the day, the boy came to me and said, “Thank you very much for helping me decide.”

The interviews revealed that dialogue with a significant adult figure at school offers students a tool to cope with their difficulties. It strengthens their relationship with the teachers and their confidence in them. Furthermore, the school staff places great importance on developing students’ sense of belonging in their class and in the school. Several examples were reported in the study, such as: an after-school framework run by members of the teaching team; a notebook in the classroom in which students can share their problems and experiences at school and at home; a “homelike” classroom design with private spaces; a morning talk accompanied by a cup of tea and breakfast, which the children prepare; a class party at a teacher’s home; birthday parties in the classroom to which parents are invited; special events, for example, a day when the students teach, overnight activities, music week, and afternoon film club. The students reported that these activities helped them connect to the educational framework. Nathaniel described his feeling this way: “You feel you belong with your friends, your class - then you feel that you belong to the whole school.”

Another aspect that was reported as contributing to the students’ sense of belonging had to do with the external assessments and awards that this school received for its integration of special needs children, which helped students develop a sense of pride and trust in the school’s principles, perceptions, and educational path. In addition, the school’s well-designed, organized, well-maintained, and nurturing environment is perceived by the students as reflecting the staff’s caring attitude towards them. This was reported as influencing their trust and the development of their relationships with teachers, classmates, and the school as a whole.

The findings indicated widespread references to students’ optimal needs such as self-esteem, social self-confidence, and self-actualization. Particular importance was attributed to strengthening self-esteem among children who had repeatedly experienced failures. The research found that school staff attempts to address this need through processes of empowerment and strengthening the sense of self-esteem among at-risk children. This is partially achieved through structured social programs at the school, such as an active system-wide democratic process that gives an equal voice and special place to every student. As Galit, the coordinator of this program, explained:

Previously, only students who were on the student council had the privilege of having an influence. Later, a process was initiated in which all students, without exception, were chosen to sit on various committees. These committees were linked to the goal of empowering the disadvantaged students. We wanted to give them the most possible recognition in order to help the students influence their own lives. These sessions enabled discussion and discourse. The children have been given a new role, and a feeling that they are not being tested. It gives them a stage, allows them to be part of something that is not threatening. They get to know other children, expand their horizons, [engage in] processes of compromise, concession, decision making. It had a direct impact on the children.

The students reported that this gave them a sense of acceptance, belonging, improved self-image, and a greater sense of efficacy. As one of the students, Uzi said: “It makes me feel like I can do something. The whole school knew that even I could have an impact.”

Another process of empowerment at this school that offers students the opportunity to express their distinctive skills and talents is participation in various activities such as team sports, choir, expressive dance troupe, art exhibitions, and more. All of these allow at-risk children to strengthen their self-esteem, social self-confidence, and recognition and realization of their abilities. As a student, Snir described: “When I won a community painting contest, the whole class cheered for me: ‘Bravo!’ It gave me a nice, shivery feeling, it’s hard to explain. It’s a feeling that, even if I’m not good at studies, I’m still worth something.”

One of the most significant processes of empowerment noted in this research were structured social programs providing students with opportunities to express giving, caring, empathy, tolerance, and inclusion. Examples are a weekly program for integrating children with intellectual disabilities into the classroom and school, students volunteering in nursing homes, working on ecology and environmental projects, and more. The teachers asserted that, beyond the inherent and important contributions of these activities, their contribution to the at-risk children was even greater. They enabled processes of normalization, reduced violence, and developed students’ sense of ability and self-esteem, because, as one teacher said, “when they help others, they actually help themselves.” Moreover, this behavior became an example that contributed to a positive atmosphere among the students. Hani, described it this way:

In the classroom, it is important for us to help each other, to contribute. We were each looking for what we could contribute, each person’s strengths, whether in painting, computers, or theater. One of the kids brought a poster from home that reads: “One for all and all for one” - this is our motto; we don’t need someone to tell us.

**Needs-Supportive Pedagogical Approach**

The findings indicate that school pedagogy is based on a needs-supportive environment that perceives at-risk children as having special needs due to their lack of family resources. This is expressed through holistic and ecological approaches, and broad responsibilities towards students and parents. It also addresses students’ unique needs through differential and tailored teaching. This pedagogical approach is needs-supportive, adaptable, flexible, and relationship-based. Below are some quotes from the current study illustrating this:

One boy who had dropped out [of other schools] arrived at this school. This boy hit the other children, scared them. But he had an open door to me. I connected with him through food and through soccer. I gradually raised the level of requests we made of him, carefully, so he wouldn’t collapse like a house of cards. (Shoshi)

A. came to us with gaps [in knowledge]. I sat with him alone. He had great difficulty copying from the board. I told him: “I’ll write it for you on a page and you will copy from that.” I remember his smile. He told me, “Oh, that is much easier. This is the first time I’ve ever managed [to do this].” (Ruthie)

While I teach, I walk around the classroom. When I notice that a child is having a hard time, I sit next to him.

I had a student who kept going out [of the classroom]. Every time, I would go out and call him back. He went out, and I called him, he went out, and I called him, like a game of hide and seek. Eighty thousand times. He realized I cared about him. He realized I wouldn’t give up on him.

I gave him attention for a few minutes at the beginning and end [of class], which allowed him to get attention without making noise. (Judith)

The school staff creates a differential, flexible, and creative program tailored to the needs, functional capabilities, and interests of each at-risk student as a unique individual. This educational program addresses the development of strengths and the strengthening of weaknesses in various areas: educational, social, emotional, and behavioral. The process, in which the students participate, repeatedly defines and determines the content of the intervention and the actions needed to achieve the goal. This is done in accordance with each student’s evolving level of functioning and changing needs. Measurement and evaluation tools are used to assess its effectiveness.

This tailored approach to learning integrates experience and a combination of diverse skills. The interviews indicate that this reduced the risk of frustration among the students, and gave them opportunities to experience aptitude and success in various areas. This was made possible, in part, due to ongoing emotional, personal dialogue with a significant adult figure. There was at least one adult for each student. Dialogue occurs in a planned and structured way within the system, as well as spontaneously in response to needs as they arise (as discussed regarding the first theme).

Another aspect of the study is the holistic approach to addressing at-risk children. This includes a variety of issues related to the children’s personal and family life and addressing their needs at school during after-school hours. The school principal explained:

Relate to a child globally; how things affect each other. You don’t talk about a child only as he is during school hours. When a teacher knows the complexity of the family situation, he has the opportunity to treat the child differently, not by giving up on the child or pitying the child, but by giving him tools. Look at where the child has come from, and what he is going back to.

The interviews reflected how this school’s pedagogical approach broadens the staff members’ concept of their responsibility for at-risk children, so that it extends beyond the stated roles and responsibilities of the organization and strives to satisfy the children’s basic needs. Food parcels are distributed to disadvantaged families, according to their needs. (These are donated by a nonprofit organization in direct contact with the school’s staff.) The school, in collaboration with the parents’ committee, provides assistance for children who need glasses, shoes, furniture, and so on. Before holidays, families receive coupons to buy food and new clothing for their children. The documents that were collected during the research indicate that many of these students’ parents are detached or have difficulty responding to their children’s needs. Therefore, the school staff members broaden their sense of responsibility for fulfilling such parental duties. Examples reported in the study include: buying tickets to a performance; planning a Bat Mitzvah celebration; a teacher who prepares sandwiches for the children at home every morning; a homeroom teacher who calls every morning to wake a student; a teacher who takes a student to a weekly mental health appointment; teachers who offer free tutoring, and more. The students even reported that this approach reflects a parental stance: “She cares about me. She’s like a mother who worries.”

Moreover, the staff’s concept of responsibility was extended to the parents, who are seen as essential partners in promoting the children’s functioning at school. Towards this end, the team strives to develop respect, trust, positive communication patterns, support, and assistance in line with the parents’ individual needs. Examples of this were raised in the interviews: staff members visiting a student when a sibling was born; providing support in court when the authorities wanted to deport the child of a foreign worker; a teacher who held a parent-teacher conference in the student’s home because the child’s pregnant mother was on bed rest; accompanying parents to government offices; mediation and assistance with professionals in the educational or therapeutic system, and more. One example was described by a teacher:

For years, I have offered support group meetings for parents in my home. The parents received information on what was happening in the classroom. They met with therapy professionals who work at the school. They voiced their problems, struggles, fears, concerns. They saw that their problems were the same. It completely changed their relationship to the school, the classroom, and me.

The participants reported that in order to enable implementation of this approach, the teaching staff’s intuitive work was replaced by structured and interdisciplinary processes in accordance with an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). There were meetings among people in various professional fields and roles such as principals, counselors, psychologists, educators, assistant teachers, and parents. If necessary, individuals from outside the child’s educational system were invited – social workers, the psychologist from the battered women’s shelter, mental health officials, youth group supervisors, and others. Such follow-up meetings take place in the evening and are not limited to a set time. They are not necessarily organized in response to a specific or unusual event. They create a shared language and foster ongoing communication between the various responsible bodies and individuals involved in the child’s life. The meetings allow for comprehensive thought processes, generating ideas, monitoring, and reaching decisions. They were found to contribute to the professionalization of staff members and helped them deal with various aspects of at-risk students’ lives. In terms of pedagogy, this interdisciplinary professional discourse allows for the construction of differential student-tailored curricula, as discussed above. The interviews and observations made it evident that the organizational culture was well-embedded at the school and shared by the entire team. The school’s formal statement about the commitment to providing tailor-made solutions for students is structured and unambiguous. The school principal described the approach in this way:

The school is a family, with everything that implies. It is a supportive group. Among this needy population, instead of the home providing support for the school, the school provides support for the home. If the home is not a supportive environment for the child, the school will provide this for him. There is no limit to our involvement. We will not go to sleep knowing that families have nothing to eat. The resources exist, we only need the will.

Finally,, the sense of well-being among students and staff at this school was examined through collecting data from standardized tests that measure school efficiency and growth (as assessed by the Israeli National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education). All parameters related to the sense of well-being among staff and students were found to be high in relation to Israel’s national average (e.g., sense of security, student satisfaction with teachers, positive teacher-student relationships, teacher expectations of students for learning progress, differential learning). This was also true for measures of students’ attitudes towards learning. This is consistent with the attitudes and feelings described by the study participants. The data from this source also indicated that, at this school, the average achievement scores among students in language and arithmetic is equivalent to or even higher than the national average. It was also found that the achievement of this school’s students in comparison to that of children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds in other schools, and the overall average score of students with special needs, is particularly high (for example, the combined students’ math score is 73 versus 36 in other schools).

**Discussion**

This study examined the pedagogical approach in a school that perceives at-risk children as having “special needs,” because their lack of family resources makes it difficult for them to succeed in school. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions that accompany the approach, its application, and its implications. The findings indicated two main themes that enabled a deeper understanding of the model: differential response to basic and optimal needs, and a need-supportive pedagogy. The first theme illustrates a tailored approach to the various needs, accompanied by empathy, faith in the child, personal dialogue, and processes of empowerment.

The second theme illustrates the organizational pedagogy at the school. This was expressed through pedagogical conceptions and processes that are holistic and ecological, a broadened sense of responsibility towards the students and parents, and differential teaching methods. The study looked at students’ well-being and satisfaction, as well as their perception of the school as a home, and the staff members’ parental attitudes towards them. In accordance with the distinctive characteristics of at-risk children, this pedagogical approach aims to ensure their development as individuals, and to be aware of their needs and well-being as a prerequisite for learning and development.

This approach is in line with Maslow’s classic theory of needs (1968, 1954), according to which an optimal environment is one that enables individuals to have their needs satisfied. These needs are defined in a hierarchical order: basic physiological needs, security needs, need for love, affection and belonging, need for self-esteem, and need for self-actualization. According to this theory, until individuals’ initial needs are met, their energy will be dedicated to satisfying these; the conditions required for higher-level activity and efforts will not yet be present.

The findings of the current study demonstrate that this school intentionally addresses and responds to the students’ various needs by providing an inclusive and appropriate environment that provides at-risk students with experiences that attempt to rectify their deprivations at home. Through understanding the children’s needs, the teachers expand their sense of responsibility and carry out some parental functions. Thus, the staff members feel responsible for fulfilling students’ needs. In practice, they fulfill this sense of responsibility by attempting to make up for the insufficient functioning of the parents. This ranges from providing for students’ primary needs such as sandwiches and eyeglasses, through fulfilling secondary needs, such as going to a theater performance.

One element noted in the study as central to creating this supportive environment is the presence of at least one authority figure who is available to have a meaningful and caring relationship with each at-risk student. This role model addresses students’ need for attachment and belonging, reducing their sense of alienation (Feinberg et al., 2008), and improving their self-esteem and self-awareness (Rogers, 1973). Dialogue strengthens students’ confidence in their own abilities and improves their sense of well-being. For at-risk students who come from a home environment in which there is a parental figure who is dysfunctional or otherwise is unable to fulfill the child’s basic needs, a supportive authority figure at the school may be seen as a substitute parent who cares and is supportive, vigilant, and alert to their difficulties and successes in school and outside of it.

Another factor that attempts to rectify the deficiencies in the students’ home and strengthens their sense of belonging at the school is the schedule of after-school social activities. Moreover, the classroom space was altered so as to allow for a homelike environment and personal space. To this are added the external assessments and awards received by the school. The students at this school developed a sense of belonging, pride, and confidence. Benvenishti et al. (2008) noted that such feelings are essential for at-risk children because they prevent the formation of negative emotions that lead to non-normative behaviors, and help develop opportunities for positive self-expression at school. A sense of alienation, in contrast, is linked to delinquent behaviors (Yuksek & Solakoglu, 2016).

Another factor identified as meeting the needs of at-risk children was the perception of the school as a nurturing environment. The at-risk children who were interviewed described the caring attitudes of the staff members and called the school a “second home.” This educational environment allows at-risk children to lay positive groundwork and build a foundation for the development of resilience against negative reactions, labelling, and environmental pressures. It helps them overcome obstacles, achieve desired goals, and prevents delinquent behavior (Bevington, 2017).

The research showed how attention to optimal needs (the higher needs in Maslow’s hierarchy), such as needs for respect, appreciation, and self-actualization, was related to empowering processes such as opportunities for expressing skills and talents (including interpersonal skills) and creating opportunities for pro-social activities of giving and caring for others. These enable students to express their hidden potential and enhance processes of social adaptation and engagement (Noy, 2004; Feinberg et al., 2008; Wilmore & Papa, 2016).

According to a model proposed by Parke and Buriel (1998), the development of positive behaviors occurs in an environment which fulfills three conditions: direct learning, experiential learning, and indirect learning through observing and imitating. These three types of educational processes took place at the case study school, as described in the Results section. Ronel and Segev (2014) added that a group operating on principles of morality can influence deviant individuals to become self-aware and undergo change. Such a change can occur when the individual becomes aware of the suffering of others and is given the opportunity to take pro-social actions that are contrary to his or her own egocentric conceptions of morality. Moreover, as the environment reinforces actions of giving to others, individuals develop a sense of belonging that enhances their motivation and willingness to continue to behave in positive ways towards others and to maintain and internalize the value of giving (Brooms, 2019). Further, according to Edad (1995), an environment that gives respect to children enables them to undergo processes of development that enhance and expand their sense of responsibility and commitment to themselves and their environment.

The approach of undertaking differential actions to address and rectify the deficiencies in the students’ home environment as a prerequisite for learning is anchored in and supported by this school’s pedagogy. This stands in contrast to the general educational system which, in most cases, views individuals in a collective and rigid way, despite the uniqueness inherent in each child (Edad, 1989). It may be noted that these systemic processes characterize the “special education” frameworks for students who are legally defined as having “special needs.” This differential pedagogy relies on relationship-based, flexible, experiential teaching and integrates multiple intelligences and skills in a way that empowers the student. Holistic observation sees individuals as more than the sum of their parts (Magnusson, 2015). It refers to the totality of the needs of the children and their family. Accordingly, the program incorporates interdisciplinary dialogue that engages professionals in diverse roles within and outside the school, in line with the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Further, the research showed that involving the parents, empowering the students, and responding to students’ basic and optimal needs are significant to the success of at-risk students. According to the research literature, such collaboration is essential for optimal development and prevention of delinquent behaviors by the child at school and in the home environment (Coleman, 2018). Teachers and parents together can develop appropriate solutions for the children, through respectful dialogue, shared thinking, observation, trial and error, feedback, and critical analysis.

This study essentially draws on one individual model at a specific elementary school. It is possible that this model includes subjective, unique, conditions or variables that cannot be isolated and which have influenced the nature of the findings. Another limitation is the inability to assess the degree of long-term change at the level of the individual at-risk child, and to examine whether this leads to a reduction of delinquent behaviors later in life. It is also difficult to assess the degree to which this organizational culture will be maintained, since the school is subject to change. Finally, the study does not allow for comparison of perceptions, delinquent behaviors, and the rate of dropout of at-risk students attending other schools.

Due to the nature of the study, which examined one specific educational environment, we recommend a longitudinal study of this particular school, in order to assess whether this pedagogy is fully incorporated into the institution and is not affected by changes in personnel and management. In addition, it would be possible to revisit this research population to reexamine the perceptions of the staff and to assess the extent to which the alumni achieved the expected outputs. For example, it would be beneficial to conduct a quantitative study examining the effects of this pedagogical model on variables such as the rate of overt and covert dropout, the rate of psychopathology, and delinquent behavior later in life. We also recommend examining this model in similar educational organizations, or alternatively in a secondary school with older students, whose primary goals include academic achievement.

In summary, just as with other populations, the theoretical understanding of at-risk children is of great significance. The theoretical definition determines the way someone in this population will be treated by their environment, the sense of responsibility felt toward them, perceptions of their potential for integration, the treatment methods used, duties carried out, rights granted, and more. A pedagogical perspective that defines at-risk students as children with special needs, characterized by deficiencies in the family realm, will provide tailored responses to them. Thus, the school staff expands its traditional area of responsibility and serves as a kind of “second home” to such students, offering a rectifying experience, fulfilling the deficiencies in the home environment. Pedagogical processes that accompany this approach make it possible to create a working model that benefits at-risk students, one that is appropriate for implementation in similar educational settings. Furthermore, this type of needs-supportive educational environment is experienced by at-risk students as a caring and attentive family environment. As such, it has been found to facilitate their ability to adapt, develop their self-esteem, and lead to achievement. It seems that there is a need for a change in perspective in the education system, moving towards a perspective that strengthens the educational staff’s commitment and responsibility towards at-risk children, and allowing for subsequent changes in legislation regarding the rights of these students.