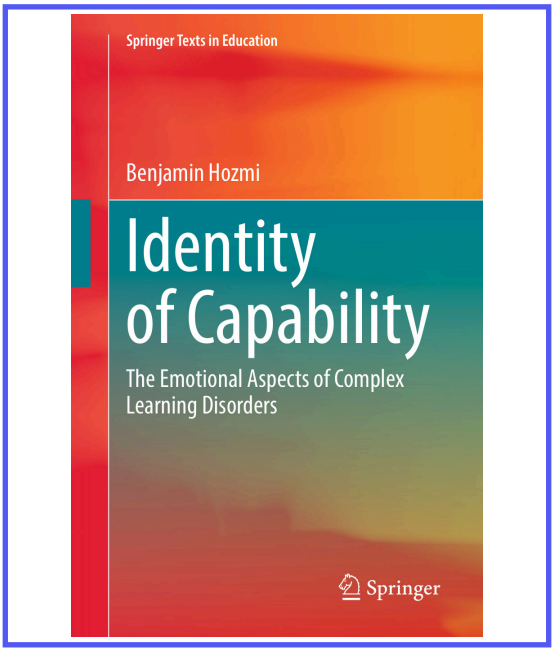


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I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and the most from my students

—The Talmud, Taanit ,7a

Published thanks to the generosity of Barbara Blumenthal.
This book is dedicated to the memory of Barbara's sister
Dorothy Jolson z"l who taught Barbara and all of us that
"Every person can grow if we just extend a helping hand".

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Introduction

Throughout my personal and professional life, I have encountered children, adolescents, and adults who were perceived as "different" because of their difficulties in learning, behavior, or function. These people were part of community life, but at the same time they were criticized and unofficially diagnosed as "Extremely mischievous", "A little unfortunate", "Not okay", "A bad child", or "Lazy". A large majority of these children and adults were the objects of jokes and were bullied and ostracized. The challenges that these children and adults were dealing with had common characteristics that could be identified, but no term existed for defining the difficulty they were coping with.

When I was the director of the tutorial project at Bar Ilan University, I encountered these children, who were designated as being "disadvantaged". They were referred to in other professional care facilities as "falling through the cracks". Approximately 20 years ago, people began to use the concepts of learning disabilities, adjustment, and function to characterize this population group, and during the past decade, the term was shortened to "complex learning disabilities".

The two major landmarks in my life that led me to devote thirty years to adults with complex learning disabilities were my direct encounter with them at the diagnostic center for the Ministry of Welfare which I managed and my work at the Ministry of Welfare care facilities in the 1990s. It was there that I learned about the unique social, occupational, and domestic needs of this population. I also came to recognize the lack of solutions that could enable them to fulfill themselves after they completed their schooling and to contribute and benefit in society as equals.

Many of the people whom I met had reached the age at which they would formulate their "future orientation", but they were extremely confused and had difficulty shaping a competent identity—a self-perception of a capable person. It was evident that for many of them, their life paths and experiences had created a state of "learned helplessness" accompanied by mourning for the life they wished to lead combined with a sense of doubt regarding their chances of fulfilling their dreams. It was there that the understanding emerged that these people were not necessarily destined to "fall through the cracks". We are obligated to initiate "tailor-made answers" in many areas of life for these people.

20 years ago, I joined "Beit Issie Shapiro"—an organization that is the home of vision and entrepreneurship for promoting the quality of life for children and adults with disabilities. My work in the organizations as the academic director resulted in the establishment of the "Inclusive University" and its core course "Identity of Capability–Introduction to Practical Psychology". The program focuses upon offering adults with complex learning disabilities an opportunity to

become integrated in studies and academic life in a unique, specially adapted accessible study program. The core course "Identity of Capability" is designed to enable participants in the program to experience a process of empowerment and to establish an identity of capability through learning selected issues in psychology that serve as a tool for empowerment. During the two decades that the program has been implemented and continuous dialog that has been conducted with its graduates, the three-step program for establishing an identity of capability developed, which is presented in this book. The program views increasing self-love as a condition for loving others and increasing social integration.

Attention is also devoted to the emotional repercussions of learning disabilities upon the world of those who live with them. Consequently, this book focuses more upon the emotional world of adults with complex learning disabilities and less upon the characteristics of learning disabilities and learning strategies for coping with them. The book will also describe the "three-step approach" to establishing a positive identity and the "Inclusive University Program" in the Trump Institute at Beit Issie Shapiro. This unique program was developed to meet the emotional needs of adults with complex learning disabilities. The book focuses upon understanding the importance of building an identity of capability as a means of growth, giving, and living a rich and satisfying personal and interpersonal life. The book also presents tools for facilitating and teaching that are directed toward building an identity of capability.

The book is divided into five sections:

The first section focuses upon the topic of "the emotional world of adults with complex learning disabilities". This section is an introduction to the contents of the book. It briefly presents the characteristics of complex learning disabilities. In some cases, these people are characterized by moderate–low intelligence and adjustment disorders alongside learning disabilities. This section also presents the possible repercussions of a complex learning disability upon the emotional world of those who experience it. The message between the lines is that despite the fact that a learning disability designates difficulties in the area of learning, attention must also be paid to its repercussions upon the person's emotional world, his or her identity, and quality of life.

The second section is entitled "What is an Identity of Capability?". This section focuses upon the development of an identity among adults with learning disabilities.

It explains the barriers that are liable to arise during the process of building positive self-value due to the challenges of the disability in various areas of life. This section focuses upon the main topic of this book: "An Identity of Capability". The contents propose the essential components for establishing an "identity card of capability". The section concludes with paradigms that promote an identity of capability that constitute the gateway to the process of personal growth.

The third section deals with the three-step approach to building an identity of capability and presents the contents of the course "Identity of Capability—Introduction to Practical Psychology" that is the tool for applying the approach. Each of the three "steps" is directed toward building an identity of capability. The content included in each step is reviewed together with the rationale for including them as well as statements by participants in the program that relate to these topics.

The fourth section presents the working model for the group "Identity of Capability—Introduction to Practical Psychology". This section focuses upon the "how" and first describes the development of the Inclusive University Program, its vision, and objectives. The section continues with a description of the guiding principles for implementing the program that emphasizes the importance of making academic content cognitively accessible and the effectiveness of the power of the group in individual growth.

The fifth section focuses upon "Empowering teaching—significant learning in an inclusive climate". I chose to devote an entire chapter to this topic since its contents are based upon "my students' voices" and insights from my life's journey as a student and teacher. These voices were processed into a model for empowering and guiding teaching. I call this model the Pentagon of Empowering Teaching. This chapter describes its components.

The contents call for a reassessment of "teacher–student" relations and suggests that we view teaching as not only a means of acquiring knowledge and education, but as a tool for producing identity as well. Despite the fact that many educators view this as a part of their obligation and even a privilege, in many contexts of education and guidance scant attention is devoted to the issue of identity.

The terms "lecturer", "teacher", and "guide" are used interchangeably throughout this book. This was done intentionally because I believe that educators alternately serve as lecturers, teachers, guides, and occasionally as "parents" for their students. This book is intended for education workers, lecturers and guides, therapists, and guidance workers who provide services for children and adults with complex learning disabilities. It is also intended for parents who serve as educational leaders for their children, family members, and adults with complex learning disabilities who can broaden their understanding about barriers in their lives and possible directions of action toward change and personal growth.

The quotes in this book are presented with pseudonyms. Instances in which no specific speaker's name is mentioned indicate that I heard this statement numerous times from adults with complex learning disabilities.

Establishing an identity of capability among students in general and among adults with complex learning disabilities in particular will enable them to identify their true strongpoints, to conceptualize them, and to place them at the forefront

of their self-image. An identity of capability is not an objective. It is a means. It is a means that is directed at helping the individual moderate patterns of avoidance, to go beyond their comfort zone, and to dare to suggest themselves as a member of society who are capable of playing an active part in the social interaction of "give and take".

Daring to give is directly connected to daring to take. Persons with an identity of capability will be more likely to venture to fulfill the proverb: "Love your neighbor as yourself" which is the essence of the Torah.

Benjamin Hozmi

Contents

I The Emotional World of Adults with Complex Learning Disabilities

1 **Complex Learning Disabilities: A Systematic Perspective** 3
What Are Complex Learning Disabilities? 4
The Family and Complex Learning Disabilities 6

2 **The Emotional World of Adults with Complex Learning Disabilities** 9
What Does It Feel Like to Have a Complex Learning Disability? 10
From Adolescence to Adulthood—A Never Ending Story 15
Loneliness and Complex Learning Disabilities 18
Rigidity and Anxiety 22
Social Anxiety and Complex Learning Disabilities 23

II Identity of Capability

3 **Identity and Complex Learning Disabilities** 29

4 **Identity of Capability** 37

5 **Paradigms that Promote and Detain Building an Identity of Capability** 49

III The Three-Step Approach to Building an Identity of Capability

6 Increasing Self-love 73
Converting Detaining Paradigms to Growth Paradigms 74
Desensitization to Dealing with Disabilities 76
Understanding the Process of Building Self-worth 77
Constructing an Identity Card of Capability 78

7 **The Second Step—Increasing Love for Others** 81
Interpersonal Interaction and Its Repercussions Upon an Identity of Capability 83
Social Integration and Social Skills 85
Developing the Ability of Assertive Communication 87

8 **The Third Step—Vision, Happiness, and Fulfillment** 91
Human Happiness and Positive Psychology 92
Intimate Relationships and Complex Learning Disabilities 95

The Working World and Complex Learning Disabilities 98
Decision-Making Processes 101

IV The Working Model for Groups in "Identity of Capability–Introduction to Practical Psychology"

9 **Integration and Striving for Equality in Academic Studies** 107
The Study Tracks 109

10 **What is Cognitive Accessibility in the Academia?** 113
The Principles of Cognitive Accessibility 115
Findings of the Program Evaluation 119

11 **The Power of the Group in Building an Identity of Capability** 123
The Group 124
Models for Group Work 125
Psychoeducational Groups 126

12 **The Introductory Discussion with Candidates for the Program** 131

V Empowering Teaching—Meaningful Learning in an Inclusive Climate

13 **What is Empowering Teaching?** 137
Person—Centered Teaching 138
Teachers' Personal Characteristics—Between Parenting and Teaching 141
Pedagogical Characteristics—The Pentagon of Empowering Teaching 143
Teachers' Perception of Students–Teachers as Service Providers 149
Creating a Safe Classroom Climate 153
The Use of Humor in Teaching 156

Supplementary Information 161
Epilogue 163
Bibliography (Hebrew Sources) from Alberti and on - All the Sources are Originally in English 164