



THE ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

RESEARCH REPORT

Promotion of Early Childhood Language Skills in the Ultra-Orthodox Community: Evaluation of a Pilot

Ronli Rotem ✦ Dalia Ben-Rabi

The study was commissioned by JDC-Ashalim and funded with its assistance

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Editor: Anat Berberian

English translation (executive summary): Naomi Halsted

Layout and print production: Leslie Klineman

Myers-JDC-Brookdale

Engelberg Center for Children and Youth

P.O.B. 3886

Jerusalem 91037, Israel

Tel: (02) 655-7400

Fax: (02) 561-2391

Website: www.jdc.org.il/brookdale

e-mail: brook@jdc.org.il

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Executive Summary

In recent years, ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) society has become increasingly aware of difficulties experienced by children in the education system, of the potential lasting impact of these difficulties on the children, and of the need to provide assistance with the help of professionals, even those who are not ultra-Orthodox. At the same time, studies show that the quality of early childhood education may rise significantly when the teachers are knowledgeable about early childhood development and when they have received professional development training.

In February 2011, JDC-Ashalim, the Ministry of Education and the nonprofit organization Achiya (a center for education and training in the ultra-Orthodox sector) introduced a pilot at Talmud Torah schools in Bene Beraq and Beitar Illit to improve the ability of the *melamdim* (male teachers in ultra-Orthodox preschools for boys) to enhance the children's language skills.¹

The program was designed to respond to the main challenges in ultra-Orthodox early childhood learning, among them:

- ◆ A shortage of ultra-Orthodox men with comprehensive training in childhood and language development
- ◆ Lack of formal training and skills in the area of language acquisition and literacy
- ◆ The concomitant utilization of Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as some traditional teaching practices that make language learning a challenge
- ◆ A lack of children's literature in Yiddish that is suitable for early childhood programs and of a sufficiently high level to impart correct language
- ◆ A shortage of suitable didactic and imaginative games in the classrooms.

The program responded to these needs by providing training for the *melamdim*. This included lectures, supervision and guidance in the preschools by ultra-Orthodox professionals, as well as development, dissemination and utilization of books and games as a means to stimulate language development among children. In addition, the program included activities with the parents, focusing on lectures and workshops about the importance of language development among children.

Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) was commissioned by JDC-Ashalim to conduct an evaluation of the program. The current report summarizes the study, which examined the impact of the program on the work of the *melamdim* and the language environment in the classroom. The report provides the first detailed documentation of the complex work of the *melamdim* in the classroom (*cheder*) which includes: Relations with the children, the incorporation of religious and cultural values in the study material, coping with the two languages, and more.

¹ The Maurice and Vivienne Wohl Philanthropic Foundation and Yad Hanadiv contributed to the funding of the program.

Study Goals and Study Design

The evaluation followed the program from its inception through three years of implementation, in order to contribute to further development and shaping of the program and to serve as the foundation for decisions concerning its expansion into additional localities. To this end, the study addressed three topics: Implementation of the program; satisfaction with the program and its estimated contribution to the *melamdim* and the children; and its impact on the *melamdim* (work practices and areas of knowledge acquired). The study instruments, which were culturally sensitive and adapted to the contents of the program, were devised in collaboration with the program staff. They included questionnaires, interviews, and 33 observations (based on the ELLCO Pre-K Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Tool) in preschool classrooms where the *melamdim* had not yet been trained and in others where they had completed training.

Study Findings

Characteristics of the *melamdim*: With regard to their professional experience and training, the background of *melamdim* participating in the program was very heterogeneous. Most had some form of training in education, but according to the program director, they did not have early childhood training.

Implementation of the program: The program was implemented for 3 years in 51 classes at 17 Talmud Torah preschools in Bene Beraq and Beitar Illit. Most taught in Hebrew and Yiddish concurrently. Some 50 *melamdim* participated. The program was overseen by a steering committee and advisory committees, which met regularly, and supported with documentation of various aspects of the implementation. A pedagogic advisor specializing in language education in early childhood closely supervised the instructors of the *melamdim*.

It was important that the program be culturally and linguistically sensitive, and meetings were held with the Talmud Torah principals in order to clarify the goals and contents of the program and the way it would be implemented. As such, only male lecturers and instructors conducted the training sessions; the instruction was adapted for an ultra-Orthodox audience and the material was suitable for the traditional subjects taught in Talmud Torah. When the training program was initiated, the program implementers discovered that there was no Yiddish children's literature suitable for the program goals and for preschool-age children with regard to the linguistic level and contents. Exceptional efforts were therefore made to produce such books, which were distributed to the participating *melamdim*.

Satisfaction: In the questionnaires and interviews, the *melamdim* reported high levels of satisfaction with the training; it met their needs and it was provided in a clear and interesting manner. The *melamdim* and the Talmud Torah principals were particularly satisfied with the practical support within the Talmud Torah, which they considered substantial and professional. The principals expressed high satisfaction with the program contents and their suitability for the material taught in the classroom. They noted the great importance of adapting the program to

conform with ultra-Orthodox values, and that this goal was achieved by finding suitable instructors and by producing appropriate games, books and study material.

The observations in the classrooms revealed that following the training, the *melamdim* had adopted new practices and were working in accordance with what they had learned. A greater number of classes in which the *melamdim* had received training (than those where the training had not yet started) received scores indicating that they were working according to the standards expected of them in several important aspects:

- ◆ Approach to the study material: Including what the children have to say in the learning process and relating to their contribution to the discussion and the topic in question
- ◆ Leveraging the variance in class for discussion and debate: Relating to the children's areas of interest and prior knowledge, making the connection between home and school, and utilizing teaching strategies that help to include all the children in the learning
- ◆ In aspects of the language environment: Atmosphere of the discourse in class, opportunities for extensive discussion, efforts to build up vocabulary. In particular, there was an improvement in the number and quality of opportunities created by the *melamdim* for broad discussion. Similarly, there was an improvement in the quality of the translation from Hebrew to Yiddish and vice versa. The *melamdim* mediated the learning and made sure that all the children understood what was said.
- ◆ In about half of the classes, the *melamdim* were given very good or excellent scores after the training for the way they utilized the games (compared with the absence of games and mediated learning, and encouragement of discussion about them prior to the program).
- ◆ And, of course, for the first time, books were introduced to the classroom and used to contribute to language development.

Discussion and Programmatic Directions

The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is known for its cultural separation in life in general and in education in particular. It is of paramount importance to this community to maintain a separate education system that is insulated from the secular world. For this reason, it is important to note the challenges facing the introduction and implementation of a program to promote language skills among the *melamdim*, since these challenges are likely to characterize every intervention in the ultra-Orthodox community, particularly educational training programs:

1. The ultra-Orthodox community is generally suspicious of anything "different," and of secular education in particular. There is a general fear of innovation, and in this case apprehension regarding changes to the study material itself and to the style of teaching. The Talmud Torah principals expressed such apprehension, but the following three strategies helped to mitigate their fears: a. The study materials and teaching methods were culturally and linguistically sensitive; b. The principals received explanations about the program and details of its components, and contact was maintained with key figures in the community; c. Steps were taken to gain their trust over time. When planning programs of this kind for the ultra-Orthodox

community, it is worth bearing in mind the length of time and amount of training required for this.

2. Boys in the ultra-Orthodox community are taught mainly by men. However, it is difficult to find male ultra-Orthodox professional educators, and non-Orthodox educators are not accepted in ultra-Orthodox circles. The absence of male ultra-Orthodox professionals is characteristic of many fields, which necessitates intervention programs to meet the gap. Hence, for example, the current program provided training to the program instructors as well, so that they would then be able to train the *melamdim*. The instructors were highly praised for their meticulous attention to the substantial task of following the performance of the *melamdim* in the classroom.
3. Broadening the circles of knowledge among colleagues and professionals in similar fields and, in this case, broadening the circles of knowledge among Talmud Torah staff: Some *melamdim* and principals consider it highly important to share knowledge about the work practices taught in the program (insights, activities, utilization of games or books) with their teaching assistants and other *melamdim* in the Talmud Torah. The instructors reported that they encouraged the *melamdim* to share with their assistants insights about play and reading activities and the strategies based on them. The principals noted in interviews that when they speak with the staff, they want to be capable of talking more expansively about the program and to encourage the utilization of the tools acquired through it.
4. High teacher turnover: This is the first time that a study has documented the patterns of turnover among *melamdim* in Talmud Torah schools. According to the program instructors, the high mobility rate among the *melamdim* (retirement, replacement, recruitment) is typical of the nature of the workforce in the ultra-Orthodox community. However, this turnover affects participation in programs and their ability to have an impact. Evidently, these participation patterns should be taken into account when planning programs and steps taken to encourage stable participation in programs.
5. The lack of teaching aids, study materials, and professional tools adapted for the ultra-Orthodox community for training, study, and professionalization may require production of such materials, as was done with textbooks in Yiddish in the current program.
6. An important aspect of the program was the documentation produced by the program implementers and the pedagogic advisor together with the instructors and lecturers. This documentation included the contents of the lectures, the work of the instructors and the process of guidance and instruction. An index was devised to classify their work. Documentation is essential both for organizational purposes and to professionalize the work of the instructors and lecturers.

The program to promote early childhood language skills was the first of its kind to be implemented in ultra-Orthodox Talmud Torah schools and served as a pilot for future training of *melamdim*. Following the pilot and based on the study findings, the Ministry of Education and JDC-Ashalim have developed a system-wide program to promote early childhood development, which will be

implemented in 7 ultra-Orthodox localities. The extensive program will train a group of professionals to be instructors, who will then provide on-site training for the *melamdin* in an effort to expand their knowledge of early childhood development and education and enhance their pedagogical skills. This program will focus on the child's socio-emotional development and well-being, both through work with the parents and by formulating a locality-based model to be implemented throughout the system.

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