



RESEARCH REPORT

In-Service Teacher Training in the Elayikh Program: Impact of the Training on Educators Working with Ultra-Orthodox Schoolgirls at Risk

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

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Cohen-Navot, M. and Awadyeh, I. 2012. *The Supportive Educational Environment in Elementary Schools – Building Teacher Capacity for Work with At-Risk Students*. RR-608-12 (Hebrew).

Cohen-Navot, M. and Lavenda, O. 2003. *Sustainability of an Educational Intervention Program "The New Educational Environment."* RR-391-03 (Hebrew).

Rotem, R. and Ben-Rabi, D. 2014. *Promotion of Early Childhood Language Skills in the Ultra-Orthodox Community: Evaluation of a Pilot*. RR-683-14 (Hebrew).

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Executive Summary

1. Background

The question of how to turn schools into a supportive environment for all their students, including those with scholastic and adjustment difficulties who are at risk of dropping out of school has been discussed in recent years, in Israel as well as in the educational literature throughout the world. The ultra-Orthodox community is becoming increasingly aware of the difficulties these students experience and the impact this has on their scholastic achievements and well-being. It is also becoming increasingly understood that these students at risk must be assisted by professionals, even those from outside of the ultra-Orthodox community.

Developed jointly by JDC-Ashalim, the Ultra-Orthodox Division and the Psychological and Counseling Services at the Ministry of Education, Elayikh is a specialized training program for school principals, homeroom teachers and counselors at ultra-Orthodox schools for girls that seeks to strengthen the participants' ability to cope effectively with the needs of at-risk students. The program, which is based on the psycho-social educational approach, emphasizes a supportive and sincere relationship between the teacher and student as a key tool to help students at-risk. The program has been implemented for six years in three settings:

1. Six ultra-Orthodox seminaries for teachers, providing certification equivalent to an academic degree
2. A pilot program conducted at 22 schools focusing on turning the schools into a place that routinely provides integrative interventions to students at risk
3. In-service professional development programs in ultra-Orthodox cities and neighborhoods conducted in sessions attended by principals, teachers and counselors from different schools. The sessions, each of which lasted about 5 hours, were held once a week over a period of 3 years. About ten women participated in each group. The groups conducted structured discussion of cases brought up by the participants and studied the theories and tools used in the psycho-social educational approach for coping with at-risk students. Participation was voluntary as the program was offered as an in-service training elective.

The current report focuses on the impact of the in-service training program on the changes in the perceptions and practices of teachers and counselors coping with students at risk following their participation in the training. It also describes how, in their opinion, these changes allowed them to improve the students' status.

In order to identify the change and the process of change, the qualitative narrative methodology was used, allowing us to present a consistent narrative of each participant's individual experience of change, as well as the experience shared by all participants. By means of the narratives of the participants we interviewed, we were able to understand what is different today in the way they work with at-risk students and the part that the in-service training played in this change.

Narrative interviews were conducted with nine teachers and counselors who had participated in the training for over two years, and a further eight structured and more informative interviews were conducted with teachers, counselors and principals. The texts were analyzed in two ways – as complete narratives and as categories. The analyses are interrelated and were conducted simultaneously, making it possible to understand the distinctive components of each change experienced by each teacher with regard to the common narrative.

2. Main Findings

2.1. Changes in the Practices of the Teachers and Counselors in the Way they Define the Problem of at-Risk Schoolgirls

1. ***Change in the perception of who is an at-risk schoolgirl:*** Change in the way of observing and defining the problem and perceived responsibility: The respondents noted that the definition of "at-risk students" as they now see it has broadened and includes all those who have experienced difficult events, defective patterns of communication, or personal-emotional difficulties during their development. The respondents explained that risk is not expressed in behavior or symptoms that can be seen in school, such as a change in dress or absenteeism, but rather that risk is what causes the behaviors – what they called "the root of the problem." Recognition that a risk situation lies behind the behaviors led the teachers to understand that the key to the solution lies in identifying the situation correctly, and that it is their responsibility to do so. Thus, the emphasis on responsibility for "finding a solution" mutates to responsibility for the process. Consequently, the teachers embarked on a process of creating a personal relationship in which both teacher and student were complete individuals, rather than simply representatives of their roles as defined by the school.
2. ***Change in the perception of what is required when working with at-risk students:*** The broader definition of risk along with the sense of responsibility for caring for the student and seeing her and the teacher as individuals led to a change in the perception of the appropriate action for coping with students at risk. The accepted approach in the ultra-Orthodox community and in ultra-Orthodox schools dictates that, for the good of the child, the school should turn a blind eye to risk behaviors, to ensure that the student "survives" in the ultra-Orthodox community. This perception among the participants changed during the training and they felt committed to addressing signs of distress. The training emphasizes the importance of asking questions and listening empathically to the answers. The goal is to get to know the student as a complete individual and to start the process of building a relationship.
3. ***Change in the perception of success when working with at-risk students:*** The participants in the training explained that there was an essential change in the way they perceived success in their work. Success is not achieved when an at-risk student ceases to behave in a way that challenges the education system or stops defying the ultra-Orthodox community. Success is achieved when a relationship is established between the teacher and the student and they get to know each other as complete individuals. Success is not keeping the student in school even when she violates codes of conduct, but in the teacher's inclusion of her. Relationships formed in this way and maintained through the teacher's efforts, will pave the student's way for coping

successfully with her risk situations. The relationship between the teacher and her students is the key to changing the student's conduct.

2.2 The Role of the Training in the Change

As expected from training based on an approach that interweaves personal processes with professional practice, according to the participants, the training itself works along the same lines. The coaches serve as models of support that the participants will follow when working with at-risk students, providing support in every area and at every time of day. In addition, the peer group also serves as a source of support. In the view of the respondents, it was the relatively long duration of the training together with the devoted support and guidance of the coaches and the support of colleagues that made it possible for all the stages of the change to happen.

2.3 Narrative of Change in the Respondents' Personal-Educational Identity

It is important to present the way that the respondents chose to tell their stories when they were asked how the training had affected them, because the way that they presented the story turned out to be no less significant than the content. In contrast to the difficulty in verbalizing the change (e.g., explaining what is meant by "being there" or "being in the conflict with a lot of patience"), the narrative's three-stage structure conveys the message of change clearly:

- 1.** A personal past: The respondents spoke about their personal background, indicating professional confidence, stability and success caring for at-risk students.
- 2.** The path traveled: The narratives continued through a middle stage, in which the respondents described themselves as replete with doubts about their ability to have an impact, and pain caused by the process of personally coping with the complexity of the students' problems. This was a stage of development, thanks to the coaches' personal involvement in the training and the experiences accumulated in their work
- 3.** New perceptions and practices: In the third part of the narrative, the respondents reported that not only had the training given them new knowledge, but also, above all, it had led to a substantial change in the way they regarded at-risk students, the risk itself and the ways of dealing with it. It had even led to a change in the way the teachers and counselors perceived themselves and their relationship with their students and colleagues. This, in turn, led to new practices.

2.4 Impact on the School

The respondents reported that the training had affected their conduct in the school. They explained that the change in their practices with at-risk students made it necessary for them to change their practices vis-à-vis their colleagues and the school principal (who had not participated with them in the training). For example, when they needed to defend the student or when they had to stand up to the principal in order to get a suitable response along with, or instead of, the accepted punishment. From what the respondents reported, we identified four areas in which the schools had been impacted: the relationship with the principal, communication with colleagues, recognition of the need for teamwork, and sanctions against the students for bad behavior. The latter is a complex issue, mainly because it is visible to the ultra-Orthodox public and is not only a matter of interpersonal educational work.

3. Discussion

The respondents discussed issues they had been addressing following the in-service training and the changes it had generated.

1. As noted, the participants in the Elayikh in-service training groups were from different schools (in contrast to the in-service training programs in which all of the staff at the same school participates together). The fact that each participant was the only professional from her school in the program may have three implications:
 - a. It could be a draining and isolating experience for the participant, since she undergoes a change that her professional environment does not go through with her.
 - b. The impact of the training on the students may be less than would be possible were the entire staff to participate in a similar program.
 - c. If the participant stops teaching the student in question, or leaves the school, similar support may not be available for the student.

In order to help the participants cope with the experience of depletion and isolation and get the fullest benefit of the training, the program has recently started to develop a support mechanism that will remain in place throughout and after the three years of the program.

2. The psycho-social educational approach focuses on the relationship between teacher and student, between a supportive adult and a child at risk. This focus makes it possible to intensify this aspect, but it is important to remember that it relates to one source of intervention to address the student's needs, while in most cases the risk situations in which the students find themselves are varied and need a variety of interventions provided by a "network of adults," providing an ecological system-wide response.
3. Professional development based on the psycho-social educational approach demands a personal effort by the teachers, an internal change (entering a profound process of dealing with fears and ingrained behaviors and ideas), and assuming the role of supportive adult, and not just of a teacher focusing on teaching. This effort is to be made on top of the duration and intensity of the program. The program staff reported a very low dropout rate, which is evidently due to the close support given to the participants. Evidently, in the process of this type of professional development training, intensive care for the professionals participating is essential.

The final issue relates to the complexity of introducing professional development training to the ultra-Orthodox community. Alongside the universal contents and practices, the program makes considerable efforts to base itself on contents and practices that are suited to ultra-Orthodox values. The rate at which the program is expanding to additional schools and professionals is sometimes limited due to the need to take into account the particular sensitivities of ultra-Orthodox society.

4. Conclusion

The current report presents the impact of the Elayikh in-service professional development program on the way the teachers and counselors cope with their students at risk. It presents the change they underwent and relates to the role of the training in this change. Thus, the findings have implications for work with students at risk in other educational fields, outside of the ultra-Orthodox community.

The ultra-Orthodox education system is not geared towards change, but rather to preserving the status quo. This makes it difficult to introduce change in educational practices in general, and in particular to educational practices that are visible to the public. Changes today are subtle and are made by balancing the status with the introduction of more suitable ways of coping. There is room for follow-up studies of the schools that include a more diverse population, including by gender, and descriptions of a broader range of practices for working with youth at risk. Furthermore, the current study does not examine the outcomes for the students. Therefore a follow-up study – for example examining the students' perspective (while still at school or after they have left) about their relationship with the teachers, and their being a source of support for them; or examining how changes that the professionals underwent affected their students' scholastic performance and their adjustment to school – could complement the current study. This would provide an important additional dimension of accumulated knowledge about programs of this kind.

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