



Myers JDC
Brookdale

Learning Process: Basis for Developing a Program for Promoting Inclusion in Regular Preschools Summary Report

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Abstract

Background

In 2020, the Pre-Elementary Education Division at the Ministry of Education and JDC-Ashalim contacted the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute, requesting that it conduct a learning process examining the way child inclusion is implemented in preschool, and the nature of that inclusion. The learning process was conducted jointly with four divisions at the ministry: the Pre-Elementary Education Division (the leading partner); the Senior Division on Implementing the Special Education, Inclusion, and Integration Law; Special Education Division A; and Senior Division – Psychological Consulting Service.

Objective

The overarching objective of the learning process was to provide policymakers with information to help them formulate a comprehensive plan to enhance the inclusion and integration of all children in preschools and promote their development towards the transition to the elementary school system.

Method

The learning process was conducted in twelve municipalities, selected by the Development Team at JDC-Ashalim and the Ministry of Education. Based on predetermined criteria, the municipalities selected had diverse characteristics in terms of size and population groups, as well as a history of collaboration with the Ministry of Education or with JDC-Ashalim.

Participants

The participants in the learning process included 146 preschool teachers in Ministry of Education preschools and kindergartens, as well as the 1,240 parents of the children attending them.

Instruments

The study combined quantitative and qualitative instruments, as follows:

1. A self-report online survey for preschool teachers: a link was sent to 213 teachers, of whom 146 completed the survey (69% response rate). The links were sent between February and July 2021.

2. A self-report online survey for the parents of all preschool and kindergarten children. Each preschool teacher sent a link to the parents of the children in her setting. A total of 1,240 parents completed the survey.
3. Focus groups with the preschool teachers, assistants, and parents: three groups in Hebrew and three in Arabic. The group sessions were held online from December 2020 to January 2021. Ten to sixteen participants attended each session.

Main Findings

The learning process indicates that among the preschool teachers, there is a difference between their stated positions regarding inclusion and their implementation in practice. The preschool teachers reported support for inclusion, but expressed misgivings and highlighted the challenges involved in its implementation: lack of practical experience in inclusion, lack of training in the area, and shortage of resources. This was true of both Jewish and Arab education. In addition, they shared that in addressing inclusion, they followed a trial-and-error approach. The main reasons for that are that 59% of them have not received professional development on inclusion, and most (86%) had no real experience in working with children with disability, particularly in the Jewish education system (93%). The preschool teachers highlighted the need for tools to deal with conduct disorders and for inclusion skills, as well as the importance of interpersonal education and the need for fundamental knowledge on disability types. In addition, 75% of the preschool teachers suggested that the assistants, who play a key role in the preschool teams, need support to work with children with disabilities, as well as professional development relevant to their work, as nearly half (48%) have not been given that opportunity.

The challenges in the work of preschool teachers are mainly the large number of children, the unique attention required for the characteristics and needs of each, and lack of resources. To these are added challenges in the relationship with the parents, related mainly to supporting the parents in the process of coming to terms with their child's difficulties and persuading them to cooperate in the process of diagnosing them. The consulting and professional support provided by the psychologist and educational consultant are important since they are the preschool teachers' main referents when she experiences difficulties in her work.

On the whole, the parents expressed satisfaction with the relationship with the preschool teachers and staff. Nevertheless, some reported that the preschool teachers and assistants lacked the tools for coping with the children's difficulties and disabilities. With regard to attitudes towards inclusion, some of the parents were in favor, while others expressed fears and doubts regarding the contribution of inclusion to their child with disabilities, or to children with disabilities in general.

Main Recommendations

The main recommendations for policymakers to promote successful inclusion are related to four stakeholder groups:

1. **Preschool teachers:** We recommend to continue reinforcing the position favoring inclusion among preschool teachers and deal with their challenges and difficulties that affect the implementation of inclusion. This may be done through increased professional development in inclusion; collecting, distributing, and applying the inclusion tools and presenting them to the preschool teachers and staff; and providing the preschool teachers with management tools to strengthen the preschools and kindergartens' status as independent administrative units.
2. **Assistants:** We recommend providing the assistants with appropriate professional development; holding joint learning meetings of preschool teachers and assistants; and strengthening the collaboration of the preschool teachers and assistants with additional staff members involved in implementing inclusion in preschools and kindergartens (professionals included in the individual/institutional support package; integration teachers; and integration assistants).
3. **Parents:** We recommend providing the preschool teachers with tools for working with the parents in their process of coming to terms with their child's difficulties; increasing parental involvement in setting up individual programs for their children, monitoring their progress, and planning the continued systemic intervention for them; strengthening the relations between the parents and preschool teachers and structuring them as part of the work routine; and creating an optimal continuum between the domestic and educational spaces. In addition, we recommend strengthening the parents' views in support of implementing inclusion, including parents of both children with and without disabilities, to help them overcome the challenges, and expand their knowledge on inclusion.
4. **The education system and municipalities:** We recommend further strengthening the roles of the consultant, psychologist, and pedagogical instructor in supporting the preschool teachers; strengthening the professional national and municipal support network for the directors; and balancing the numbers of children entitled to special education services across the kindergartens and adjusting the resources allocated accordingly. Finally, we recommend adjusting the educational environments of the kindergartens for greater accessibility and investing in their physical maintenance.