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Integration as Partnership: Evaluation Study

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the Integration as Partnership program, the goal of which is to promote the social integration of children with disabilities, who attend special education schools, with children in regular schools. The program creates partnerships between schools – one special education, the other regular – which are paired on the basis of physical proximity and the age of their pupils (regular pupils: 9–11, special education: 8–14). The goal of the partnership is to establish a social relationship between the two groups of children at regular encounters facilitated and supervised by a professional staff (subject teachers, homeroom teachers, special education teaching assistants, and counselors). The joint activities include art, social, and sports activities. They are held alternately at each of the schools and are followed up by separate sessions for the two groups devoted to ventilating the children's feelings. In addition to these encounters, the groups are also brought together for other activities during school hours, such as field trips, ceremonies, and cultural activities. Integration as Partnership is designed to provide children at special education schools, who do not generally encounter their contemporaries at regular schools, the chance to meet and interact with them. For the latter, this is a chance to get to know, understand, and accept children of their own age who are different from them.

The goal of the study was to evaluate the implementation of the program in four different partnerships and the outcomes of the program for the participants. Two of the partnerships (in Afula and Tel Aviv) arranged encounters between children with cerebral palsy (CP) and children at regular schools and the other two (in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) held encounters between children with mental retardation and children at regular schools. The evaluation of the implementation process examined issues such as difficulties and problems that arose during the various stages of the implementation; the way the program was actually implemented and how this matched what had been planned; the extent that participants were prepared; and the extent of cooperation and coordination among those involved in the program. With regard to the outcomes of the program, we examined whether the encounters enhanced the children's perceived ability (self-efficacy) to participate in activities together with children in the other group; whether there was a change in the children's attitudes toward members of the other group; whether the interaction between the two groups of children intensified in the course of the encounters; whether the children became increasingly willing to participate in activities with members of the other group; and the level of satisfaction of all parties involved in the programs.

The study design: This was a longitudinal study of each of the partnerships and included two measurements: the first before the encounters began – generally at the start of the school year – and the second immediately after the final encounter, usually toward the end of the school year. Each group of children at the regular schools was paired with a control group of children from a neighboring school that did not participate in the encounters. The evaluation was conducted during the 2001/2 and 2002/3 school years. The information was taken from: (1) Structured

interviews with children at the regular schools, special education children with CP, and children from the control groups; (2) Interviews with parents of the children in special education and those at the regular schools; (3) Interviews with the teachers and principals who participated in the program and with relevant professionals at the Regional Support Centers and Ashalim; and (4) Observations of over half the encounters of all of the partnerships as well as staff meetings and preparatory activities before the encounters. Altogether interviews were conducted with: 77 children at regular schools who participated in the encounters; 15 children in special education; 93 children at regular schools in the control groups; 65 parents of children at regular schools who participated in the encounters, and 28 parents of children in special education who participated in the encounters.

With regard to the *process of implementation*, all four partnerships brought up several *key issues* that were relevant to all the programs:

- ♦ ***The ratio of children at regular schools to those in special education:*** What is the desirable ratio? Evidently a large numerical disparity, as was the case in one of the partnerships (a large number of children at regular schools with a small number in special education), could make the special education children feel threatened and lead to a situation in which not all the children at regular school have the opportunity of direct contact with those in special education. A large disparity becomes even more problematic when some of the special education children fail to attend an encounter. On the other hand, a large disparity does have an advantage in that it enables children at regular schools to “step away” from the interaction when they experience difficulty during a particular activity. In two of the partnerships the ratio was approximately 1:2, with twice as many children from regular schools as those in special education. This is the optimal ratio because it allows children from the regular schools who are experiencing a particular difficulty to “withdraw” temporarily from the activity and it does not make the special education children feel threatened.
- ♦ ***Selection of children and staff for the partnership programs:*** Should a whole class at the regular school be selected or should children from several parallel classes be allowed to choose whether or not to participate in the encounters? Different partnerships opted for different strategies, which had implications for the partnership process and the children's involvement in it and also affected their motivation to contribute to the success of the encounters. This was particularly salient in one of the partnerships, where the children were not given the choice and there was a distinct lack of motivation, particularly in the first stage of the partnership. In another partnership, where children were allowed to volunteer for the project, one could sense a greater involvement on their part. However, there are also organizational/system-based considerations (such as whether to allow children from two classes to be absent for the project, which would disrupt lessons in both classes that day). It is important also to consider the characteristics of the regular-school children chosen to participate so as to avert disturbances during the encounters. In one of the partnerships, for example, the children had numerous behavioral problems. The selection of staff members

involved in the encounters and their motivation are also important. The program is more likely to succeed if highly motivated members of staff who want to join the project can be chosen.

- ♦ ***Holding preparatory activities and providing ongoing guidance for the children participating:*** Preparatory activities are most important, particularly if the children at regular schools have not previously been exposed to children with disabilities. The preparation must be tailored to address the type of disability of the children in the program and should not be too general, which was the case in one of the partnerships. It should provide the children at regular schools with the tools for appropriate behavior when interacting with children with disabilities. If possible, illustrative aids (e.g., films showing the daily lives of children with the same type of disability as that of program participants and interaction with them), should be used, and this was done in some of the partnerships. It is important that professionals be available to provide the children with an ongoing support and help mechanism. The help must be given on a regular basis and not just when there is an acute crisis, which is what happened in one of the partnerships.
- ♦ ***Preparatory activities for teachers:*** Preparatory activities are also essential for the teachers from the regular schools, some of whom have never experienced contact with special education children or facilitated large groups of children with heterogeneous abilities.
- ♦ ***Adapting the activities to suit both groups of children:*** In order for the program to succeed, it is very important for the contents of the activities to be suitable for both groups of pupils. It was sometimes felt during the program that a certain activity was more appropriate for the children in one of the groups and that members of the other group were either bored or found the activity difficult. The suitability of the activity for both groups should be examined while it is taking place and changes or adjustments should be made as necessary. In one of the partnerships it became clear that the program originally chosen (sport and art) was unsuitable and in the second half of the session a different form of activity was chosen, which enhanced the children's involvement and provided a more positive atmosphere.
- ♦ ***Regular staff meetings:*** The staff meetings were designed to give feedback to the staff involved in the program, to identify problems and suggest solutions, and to plan further joint activities. In practice, some of the partnerships experienced difficulties with the meetings, including the matter of compensating the teachers for attending meetings after school hours or on their days off. It is important to examine the requisite conditions for regular staff meetings, because they are crucial to the success of the encounters. In one of the partnerships, staff members expressed dissatisfaction with the excessive number of meetings (which were held every four to five weeks), but another partnership held meetings too infrequently (only about three in the entire year), which made it impossible to work through problems and concerns together. Other partnerships found different channels of communication for reciprocal feedback and planning future activities and this work method was also apparently effective.
- ♦ ***Reciprocity regarding the location of the encounters and joint facilitation by representatives of both schools:*** Since every child naturally is at a relative advantage in his/her own familiar surroundings and with teaching staff s/he knows, reciprocation is important and both the

schools should host encounters, as was indeed the case in all the partnerships. This also enables the children to benefit from resources that are sometimes only available at one of the schools (such as special music or sports equipment). It is important for representatives from both schools to be given equal opportunities to facilitate the activities so as to avert a situation in which a teacher from only one of the schools is responsible for giving the class. Such a situation might demotivate the one who is not teaching and detract from the positive atmosphere of the encounters, as was indeed the case in one of the partnerships.

- ♦ ***Allocating staff to supervise the encounters:*** In the observations of the encounters, there was sometimes a sense that there were not enough staff members to supervise the activities or that inefficient use was made of the staff available in some of the partnerships. In other cases, there was a sense of overstaffing, giving the impression too many adults were milling around the area where the activity was being held. It is important to consider the characteristics of the children and the activities, and staff members must be allocated carefully to ensure they are employed efficiently and appropriately.
- ♦ ***Examination of the physical, logistical, and economic aspects of managing the partnerships:*** The physical suitability of the regular school for special education children is a key issue, since some schools need to be adapted to provide wheelchair access. The question of mobility from one school to the other also deserves special attention, since when the two schools are far apart, transportation may have to be budgeted and the timing of the encounters has to be planned in advance to allow for time-consuming factors (such as transportation from one school to another and the time required to organize before and after the journey). In addition, it is worth considering some form of remuneration for the teachers involved in the programs, even token compensation (such as awarding them certificates of appreciation at an end-of-year ceremony), in order to boost their motivation and compensate them for their great investment.
- ♦ ***Timing and amount of unstructured activity and free interaction among the children:*** This issue was raised in almost all the partnerships. Should the children be given free time for unstructured activity? Should they be allowed to experience this type of activity during recess? And if so, at what stage of the encounters should it take place and how much should there be? There is no straightforward answer. In two of the partnerships there was evidently not enough time for free interaction among the children, while at another there was a sense that too much time was devoted to such activity. Evidently including unstructured activity at too early a stage of the encounter series or devoting too much time to it at each session could produce precisely the opposite effect to the one intended, i.e., the children could end up staying in their own groups with the special education children finding themselves segregated from the others. It is consequently appropriate to allow free interaction only after the two groups of children have become well acquainted and it should be for a limited time only.
- ♦ ***Feedback discussions and going over the encounters with the children:*** It is very important for the teaching staff to conduct feedback discussions and work through the activities with the children separately at each school so they can ventilate their feelings and cope with difficulties

relating to the encounters. This does not always take place after the activities and it may sometimes be essential to have the supervision of a welfare professional (social worker or school psychologist) to help work through the encounter and what was experienced in it.

- ♦ ***Contact with the parents:*** Evidently thought should be given to involving the parents of the children in the partnership programs as well as to finding ways of augmenting their inclusion in the program or giving periodic feedback on the activities. It is a good idea to use the parents as leverage for integration and as a means for support for the children in case of need. Indirectly, the parents are also a medium through which the program can have a broader impact on the child's social circle both at home and in the community.

Looking at the entire process over time, the various partnerships appear to have been implemented successfully. However, certain factors made the implementation difficult, chiefly in the early stages. For example, in some cases, it was felt that the children and staff at the regular school needed extra preparation for the encounters. It was sometimes felt that too few support staff had been allocated to supervise the encounters and, sometimes, that there were too many (which gave the feeling of a surplus of adults at the activity). There were also technical difficulties (such as transport) and problems managing the partnership encounters themselves (creating cooperation between the staffs of the two schools in each partnership and making the right selection of contents to make the encounters interesting for the children from both the regular and special education schools).

Evaluation of the implications of the partnership programs for changing attitudes toward children with disabilities: With regard to the outcomes of the partnership programs, in all four partnerships, a significant positive change in the attitudes of children at regular schools in the experimental group (relative to the children in the control groups) was found between the first and second measurement. In addition, the program evidently had a stronger effect in changing attitudes in one of the partnerships than in the others. Among the special education children with CP whom we interviewed, we did not observe a consistent trend of change in attitude over time. Among parents of the children in regular education, no significant difference in their attitudes toward the encounters was found in the two measurements, but most of the parents reported a high degree of satisfaction with the program and a willingness to continue the encounters in the future. They also reported that their children had enjoyed the encounters. An examination of the attitudes of the parents of the special education children in the two measurements showed a less positive attitude toward the encounters in the second measurement. However, these parents expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the encounters and a wish to continue with them. These findings apparently testify to the fact that some of the special education children experienced difficulties in the program, which made their parents' attitudes less positive and more critical. The parents nonetheless expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the encounters because inclusion is a major value for them.

Implications of the program for the children's self-efficacy: In all four programs as a whole, a significant positive change was found between the two measurement points in the self-efficacy of the children in the experimental group as compared with the children in the control group. In other words, between the two measurements there was an improvement in the regular-school children's perceived self-efficacy to conduct different activities with special education children.

Implications of the program for the social contact and interaction between the children over time: In each of the partnerships there was an increase in the strength of the interaction between the two groups in the course of the encounters. In some partnerships, this was particularly striking and personal ties developed between the children. This increase was characterized by a growing closeness between the children in both groups and stronger mutual cooperation and acceptance.

The findings have been presented to the Ashalim committee responsible for children with special needs and are being used by the program planners.

The study was initiated and co-funded by JDC-Israel and Ashalim.

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