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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**The Supportive Educational Environment
("Rivchat HaPrat") in Elementary Schools:
Building Teacher Capacity for Work
with At-Risk Students**

Revised Edition

Miriam Cohen-Navot ♦ Iman Awadyeh

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



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Executive Summary

The Supportive Educational Environment (SEE)¹ is a program designed to promote low achievers and children at risk in elementary and junior high schools. The program is based on the New Educational Environment program, which encourages an essential change in the approach of high schools to their work with at-risk students. Both these programs were developed by JDC-Ashalim in a long-term collaboration with the Ministry of Education, local authorities and schools. This revised edition is being published at a time when the education system is showing great interest in developing policy and methods to promote at-risk students and follows extensive efforts to assimilate the program principles in different ways. This edition concludes with an afterword describing the developments in implementation of the program principles the education system.

The program endeavors to achieve its goal through intensive, long-term (3-4 years) training with school staff: homeroom teachers, management staff and the senior interdisciplinary staff at the schools, whose job is to support the teachers' work with individual students. The staff receives ongoing training for their educational-therapeutic and pedagogic work with children identified as being vulnerable to risk, with maximum emphasis on the socio-emotional needs of these children. The training is designed to broaden teachers' perception of their role and to promote professional growth among teachers, based on the assumption that these changes will improve their ability to identify children at risk and provide them with appropriate support. The facilitators also meet with students and parents, along with the teachers, in order to model effective ways of working for the teachers.

The study examined a pilot of the program that was implemented before the introduction of the Ofek Hadash ("New Horizons") reform. The reform provides teachers with considerable time for working individually with students and parents, and, at the same time, emphasizes training programs for teachers on effective ways to utilize these new resources. Thus, the lessons learned from the implementation of the program are highly relevant at the present time, when training teachers to advance students with multiple needs through individualized inputs is high on the agenda of the educational system.

The goals of the evaluation study were to identify the main elements of the intervention, to support development and expansion of the program, and to increase knowledge about training to strengthen the teacher's work with at-risk students. The study focused on implementation of the program in elementary schools and described the process of implementation and the changes that occurred among the school management and teaching staff, both in regard to the way they perceived their work and their actual work with the students. The study also examined the needs of the students and monitored changes in their status over two academic years. The needs were measured according to different risk areas, using an instrument that was developed jointly by the study team and the program staff.

¹ When the program was implemented in elementary schools, it was originally known by the name ADAM. It later became known as "Rivchat Haprat" in Hebrew.

The study monitored the program over the first 4 years of implementation of the pilot (from the 2002/2003 to 2005/2006 school years). Most of the data were collected in 4 schools in Jerusalem, a city with a heterogeneous population.

A range of study instruments were used:

- ◆ Individual and group in-depth interviews with the school staff, in order to learn about the implementation process and the changes in the work at the school during each of the study years (75 interviews)
- ◆ Quantitative instruments that were distributed to the schools, mostly during the third or fourth year of implementation in the respective school
 - Questionnaires to all the teachers in the schools, mostly at the end of the third year of implementation in the school (altogether 72 teachers)
 - A class mapping tool, completed by all the homeroom teachers for every student in the class, recording their needs and the activities conducted with them, in most cases at the beginning and end of the third year of implementation, In two of the schools, it was completed again at the end of the following school year (altogether 1,380 students)
 - Questionnaires for the homeroom teachers about at-risk children whom they had identified as belonging to the target population – at the end of two school years, mostly the second and third year of implementation in the respective school (149 students).

Characteristics and Needs of the Students

One of the study goals was to characterize the risk situations of the student body. Using the class mapping tool at the start of the year, the homeroom teachers provided data about the family backgrounds of the students, the level of their scholastic achievements in language and mathematics, and their socio-emotional functioning. The findings reveal that at least one family-related risk factor was reported for 13% of the students, (including being new immigrants, serious dysfunction in the family, financial difficulties in meeting basic needs); 14% were reported to have at least two socio-emotional problems (including frequent school behavior problems, difficulty accepting the teacher's authority and problems of emotional adjustment or social integration). Likewise, about a third of the students were reported to lag behind in one or more school subjects; learning behavior problems were reported for 17% of the students and 4% had attendance problems.

According to a summary measure for risk, 22% of the students had a risk factor in one area, 11% had risk factors in two areas, and 9% were reported to have risk factors in three or more areas.

Implementation of the Program

The program was implemented through staff training and meetings of the facilitators, homeroom teachers, students and parents.

The staff training was in two areas: psycho-educational and psycho-pedagogic. The former was designed to lead to a process of staff development and personal professional development of the teachers for working with students, through attention to their individual needs and a holistic perspective, while involving the parents in the process. In contrast, the latter emphasized pedagogic work appropriate for at-risk students. Both types of training were provided by experts in the field of mental health and pedagogical work with underachieving students at risk. They included weekly training sessions for the senior staff and groups of homeroom teachers. There were also individual sessions for the school principals and some of the teachers and observations of the classroom work with at-risk students. In addition, the facilitators worked directly with students and parents with multiple needs, in complex situations, in order to demonstrate effective work to the teachers.

All of the principals and most of the teachers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the training and the ongoing support. The information gathered from them in the individual and group interviews enabled the study team to assess the benefits of the program for the teachers, its impact on their work and the difficulties in implementation. The teachers' reports reveal that the training and ongoing support gave them an opportunity to involve colleagues in their work and receive emotional support, and made it possible to develop teamwork among the teachers in each grade, as well as among the senior staff. A "safe space" was created, based on trust and support among the staff members, relationships that encouraged staff members to raise difficulties and expose their concerns, and to generate and adopt more effective responses.

The teachers reported that the training helped them develop their own "inner dialogue" – e.g., in-depth reflection about their work with children at risk. This was achieved by strengthening processes of self-appraisal of their work in this area, leading them to re-examine practices for working with children at risk and assume greater responsibility for advancing these students. Most of the teachers who participated in the training reported that it greatly contributed to their understanding of the needs of the students, their ability to clarify problems and their interpersonal relations with the students. The program was not intended to focus on teaching materials or teaching methods in general, and, in fact, most of the teachers did not report much benefit in those areas.

In interviews, the teachers reported that the training had contributed to their work with the students in many areas, through:

- ◆ Greater understanding of the type of difficulties experienced by the students, particularly with regard to hyperactivity and attention deficits
- ◆ Acquisition of tools to identify students at risk and diagnose scholastic difficulties
- ◆ Enhanced ability to create a constructive dialogue with the students
- ◆ Greater knowledge about ways of dealing with behavioral and disciplinary problems
- ◆ Greater knowledge about ways of working with parents.

The school principals noted that the training had increased their awareness of problems in the teachers' functioning and the way teams worked together and of actions to be taken (e.g., more feedback to teachers, documentation, follow-up, etc.). Furthermore, the principals reported that the training had supported their ability to cope with managerial difficulties.

Implementation Difficulties

Some of the teachers reported the difficulty inherent in self-reflection and opening themselves up to their colleagues, as required by the training; tension between teachers, which held back group processes; lack of structure in the training sessions; extra burden caused by the demand to document the students' needs.

The changes in the school activities that the program seeks to achieve affect the work of all the members of the school staff – homeroom teachers, subject teachers, principals and mental health staff. The resources required for the program are quite considerable: Training by two professional facilitators for one full day every week for three years. However, the complexity of the processes means that the training has to be in small groups and each participant is required to remain in the program for at least two years. In this pilot, due to limited resources, the subject teachers were not, in most cases, included in the training process and it was widely believed that this hampered school-wide change. The program faced the dilemmas as to how to allocate limited resources: Should the training be offered to homeroom teachers only? Or should it be offered to all the teachers of certain grades?

The training focused on strengthening the functioning of middle management staff at the schools so that they would become more effective in creating conditions to support the teachers' work with students at risk. However, difficulties arose in defining the role of these forums and in helping them to function as senior staff teams.

While the study was being conducted, the training was provided by professionals from outside the school and there was a need to consolidate coordination and cooperation with the existing mental health staff at the school. Different strategies were attempted to support cooperation in the light of various difficulties, including the small amount of time generally available to the permanent mental health staff.

Methods Used in Work with the Students

As noted, the training was intended to encourage school staff to adopt a more effective educational approach for work with children at risk. In order to examine whether this approach was indeed adopted, various work practices considered to be basic and particularly meaningful for working with children at risk were defined: Intensive contact with the student and parents; support for school staff; and referral of the student to professionals for diagnosis and treatment, as necessary.

The study examined the extent to which these practices were implemented by means of the teachers' end-of-year reports on their work with each student during the year using the class mapping tool. The findings reveal that the teachers had frequent personal discussions with most of the students with learning-behavior or socio-emotional problems, (at least once a week) and were in touch with the parents (home visits or conversations at least once a month). They also reported that they consulted with other staff members, the program facilitators or therapists and referred the students for therapy. These work practices were also employed to a far greater extent with the students in the other risk situations – family problems and scholastic gaps – than with the general student body at the school, indicating that the teachers allocate activities according to the needs of the students. Note that differences were found among the schools with regard to the implementation of the various practices.

In addition, it was found that the greater the level of risk, the greater the number of "basic" work practices used with the students. The teachers reported using 4 of the basic work practices for 40% of the students at high risk, compared with 25% of the students at low risk.

Changes in the Status of the Students

The homeroom teachers were asked to note which of their students were in risk situations and again, one year later, to assess to what extent there had been a change in their status. They reported a "very positive change" in the status of 35% of the students in their class and a "minor positive change" for a further 48%.

The status of students at risk was further examined by checking differences in functioning between points in time, as indicated in homeroom teacher assessments using the class mapping tool. A comparison between functioning at the start and end of the year (6 months apart) revealed an improvement in functioning (a transition from non-normative to normative) among a significant percentage (50% or more) of the students who had exhibited problems in each of the following areas: attendance, school behavior, acceptance of authority, emotional adjustment and social relations. In addition, scholastic gaps were erased for about a third of the students who were reported to be lagging behind at the start of the year.

An additional mapping on the status of the students was conducted in two of the schools at the end of the following year (about 18 months after the first). This revealed that the percentage of students whose status had improved was even higher than when examined after 6 months, and that over half of the students who had exhibited problems at the start of the period were functioning normally, including learning behavior and homework completion, at the end of it.

Conclusion and Discussion

SEE is intended to enhance work with students at risk by significantly changing teaching staff activity. The program is distinctive in that it works through an intervention to strengthen the staff, by changing their activity during their regular work hours, without adding incremental hours as in most other programs. Many of the teachers who took part in the program reported a high level of

satisfaction, as it gave them the opportunity for collaborative reflection and emotional support and enabled them to develop an "inner dialogue" through which they could reconsider their work with children at risk. The teachers reported that the program contributed significantly to their work, chiefly by enhancing their knowledge about coping with the socio-emotional needs of children at risk and strengthening organizational support mechanisms. In addition, the class mapping tool, which was developed in the framework of the study, was recognized as an effective tool for planning activities with the students according to their needs and for monitoring their progress.

In effect, most of the students in risk situations received meaningful support from their teachers during the school year. About 40% of the at-risk students reduced the educational gaps and most of them advanced in their attendance rates and had fewer behavior problems. The study findings underline the complexity of the training process for the teachers, which entailed a change in their understanding the students' and parents' needs and adoption of new, more effective tools for their daily work.

Implementation of the program entails contending with multiple organizational challenges that derive from the intensive character of the training process and the aspiration to bring about change in the school as a whole, e.g., strengthening senior management, middle management, and overall sources of support for the teachers. Similar to the training for the teachers, such changes also entail complex long-term processes, and the outcomes were considered significant.

Alongside the considerable progress of many of the students, the data on students' functioning also indicated that some of those at risk did not attain an appropriate level of functioning at the end of the measurement period. Some of the teachers expressed frustration with the situation and their efforts to work with these students. The findings also reveal that some of the students in the highest risk situations did not benefit from all of the "basic" work practices that were identified as meaningful in working with children at risk, and that the teachers had difficulty providing the full range of responses required by students. Some of them also reported a heavy workload when attempting to work according to the program approach. One of the challenges facing policymakers and school management is to create the organizational conditions and provide school resources to enable teachers to provide their students with the full range of responses that they require.

The study findings reveal that implementation of the program demands an intensive, multiyear training program at every school. Further, there is a need to provide adequate training resources to complete the program for the participating teachers and to broaden participation in the training program for the maximum number of teachers and officials. In addition, in implementing the program, thought must be given to several key issues, including:

- ◆ The need to support those teachers who are uncomfortable with the in-depth group process
- ◆ The need to structure the cooperation between the external facilitators and the permanent professional therapy staff in the school

- ◆ The need to structure the role of the senior and middle management and develop additional support mechanisms at each school
- ◆ The need to continue developing knowledge as to how to convert the insights acquired during training into effective activity with students who still challenge the teaching staff.

Afterword: Developments in the Education System and the Program since Implementation of the Pilot

As noted, the study was conducted prior to implementation of the New Horizon reform in the elementary schools. The reform, which was introduced gradually as from 2007/2008 and now includes every elementary school in Israel, is intended to increase the teachers' work with individual students, be it through scholastic activity or through individual discussions with the students or their parents. The successful implementation of New Horizon, as well as other subsequent processes directed at increasing the professional staff available to the schools, should contribute considerably to the work with at-risk students. Concomitantly with the implementation of New Horizon, emphasis has also been placed on school-based in-service training for the pedagogical staff.

At the same time, there is growing interest in the education system in programs that strengthen teachers' ability and impart effective ways of working to identify children at risk, determine appropriate interventions, and, of course, implement them. In recent years, there have been a number of developments enabling broad dissemination of the educational approach developed through SEE. Since its inception, it has been implemented in hundreds of schools,² through the close cooperation of JDC-Ashalim, the Ministry of Education, and local authorities throughout the country. The program is currently being disseminated with the assistance of the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk (through a program called Intervention for Growth or as one of the components of the "MERHAV" program), as well as through Better Together, an initiative of JDC-Ashalim to strengthen neighborhoods with disadvantaged populations. As the program has developed, many efforts have been made to address issues that arose in the study. In addition, knowledge needs to be developed about how to adapt the SEE approach to the Arab and ultra-Orthodox schools. JDC-Ashalim and the Ministry of Education are now partnering to develop ways of adapting the program's principles for these systems.

In addition to the SEE strategy of work in schools, additional models have been developed to strengthen the work of teachers, based on the same principles:

- ◆ A new strategy at the locality level is TSACHI, a program designed to enable extensive dissemination of the SEE method. Training is provided to senior professionals in the locality (chiefly educational psychologists and educational counselors) to enable them to provide professional facilitation based on the SEE method in the schools where they work
- ◆ Another development is the strengthening of training programs in this spirit at institutes of higher education – the most outstanding example, being the development of the LI-KAL

² Information provided by JDC-Ashalim.

("it's easy for me to teach children who are difficult to teach") BA and MA tracks in education and teaching of excluded students.

- ◆ The Ministry of Education defined the objective of "containment" as a major component of its strategic planning, responsibility for which is shared by all divisions of the Pedagogic Administration. As part of the activity to achieve this goal, emphasis is placed on long-term school-based training for teachers to improve their ability to advance at-risk students, and the setting up interdisciplinary teams at every school to be responsible for identifying needs among the pupils and making decisions about the treatment programs (including the need to refer to committees that determine eligibility for mainstreaming support or special education), which will be a source of support for the teachers.

Thus, we see widespread recognition of the need to strengthen the quality of teachers and the work of the staff. Relative to the past, schools currently have more considerable resources at their disposal, making it easier both to work individually with students and parents and to provide comprehensive training for the school staff. The Supportive Educational Environment could make a considerable contribution to structuring training and methods of work in order to achieve the maximum benefit from these important resources. The current challenge on the agenda is the effective assimilation of the strategies developed for work with at-risk students. The findings will enable decision makers and professionals to learn from the experience acquired in implementing the program and strengthen efforts to promote assimilation of these strategies in the future.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Study Method	5
2.1 Study Goals	5
2.2 Data Collection	6
2.3 Limitations of the Quantitative Study Design	7
3. Characteristics and Needs of the Students	8
3.1 Family Background of the Students	8
3.2 School Behavior	9
3.3 Scholastic Gaps	9
3.4 Socio-Emotional Problems	10
3.5 Summary Risk Measure	11
4. Implementation of the Program	12
4.1 Description of the Intervention	12
4.2 Satisfaction of the Teachers and School Principals	14
4.3 Benefits of the Program to the School Staff	15
4.4 Implementation Difficulties	24
5. Basic Work Practices for Working with Students at Risk: Extent of Actual Implementation	27
5.1 Personal Discussions with Students	27
5.2 Contact with Parents	28
5.3 Consultations with Regard to Students	29
5.4 Referral to a Mental Health Professional for Diagnosis	29
5.5 Number of Basic Practices Implemented	30
6. Changes in the Functioning of the Students over the School Year	31
6.1 Change in the Level of Functioning of at-Risk Students, by Subjective Teachers' Reports	31
6.2 Data Regarding Changes in Functioning of Students at Risk, based on the Class Mapping Tool	32
7. Conclusion and Discussion	34
Bibliography	37
Appendix I: Study Data by School	43
Appendix II: The Class Mapping Tool (including Instructions)	49

List of Tables

4.2 Satisfaction of the Teachers and Principals with the Program

Table 1: Satisfaction with the Program, by School 14

Table 2: Satisfaction with Aspects of the Training, by School 15

4.3 Benefits of the Program to the School Staff

Table 3: Teachers' Assessment of the Contribution of the Training Sessions 24

List of Figures

1. Introduction

Figure 1: Intervention Model 4

3.1 Family Background of the Students

Figure 2: Family Risk Factors for the Students 9

3.2 Scholastic Behavior

Figure 3: Difficulties in School Behavior and Attendance at the Start of the Year 9

3.3 Scholastic Gaps

Figure 4: Gaps in Scholastic Achievements in Language and Arithmetic at the Start of the Year 10

3.4 Socio-Emotional Problems

Figure 5: Socio-Emotional Problems at the Start of the Year 10

3.5 Summary Risk Measure

Figure 6: Risk Indicators among the Students 11

Figure 7: Summary Measure of Level of Risk: Distribution of Risk Indicators 12

5.1 Personal Discussions with the Student

Figure 8: Percentage of Students with whom the Homeroom Teacher Held Personal Talks Very Frequently, by Risk Indicator 28

5.2 Contact with the Parents

Figure 9: Percentage of Students with whose Parents the Teacher was in Regular Contact (Discussions or Home Visit), by Risk Indicator 28

5.3 Consultation with Regard to the Student

Figure 10: Students about whom the Teacher had Consulted with Professionals at Least Once, by Risk Indicator 29

5.4 Referral to a Mental Health Professional for Diagnosis or Treatment

Figure 11: Students Referred to or Receiving Professional Therapy, by Risk Indicator 30

5.5 Range of Basic Practices that were Implemented

Figure 12: Distribution of Implementation of Several Basic Practices, by Level of Risk 31

6.1 Changes in the Status of Students at Risk per Home Teachers' Assessments

Figure 13: Homeroom Teachers' Assessment of the Change that Occurred during the Year among Students Identified in the Target Population of the Program 31

6.2 Examination of the Changes by Differences in Level of Functioning, as Reported in the Class Mapping

Figure 14: Percentage of the Students Exhibiting Appropriate Functioning at the End of the School Year, or at the End of the Following Year, among those Identified with Difficulties in Functioning at the Start of the Year 32

Figure 15: Percentage of the Students Exhibiting Appropriate Functioning at the End of the School Year, among those Identified with Difficulties in Functioning at the Start of the Previous Year in Two Schools 33

List of Tables and Figures in Appendix I

Table I-1: Summary Measure of Risk Level: Distribution of Risk Indicators, by School 45

Table I-2: Homeroom Teachers' Assessment of the Extent of Change in the Level of Functioning of Students at Risk during the Current Year 48

Table I-3: Students with Appropriate Functioning in Various Areas at the End of the Year, among those Identified with Difficulties in Functioning at the Start of the Year, by School 48

Figure I-1: Family Background of the Students, by School 43

Figure I-2: Problems of Learning Behavior and Attendance at the Start of the Year, by School 43

Figure I-3: Gaps in Scholastic Achievements in Relation to the Curriculum in Language and Arithmetic at the Start of the Year, by School 44

Figure I-4: Socio-Emotional Problems at the Start of the Year, by School 44

Figure I-5: Risk Indicators among the Students 45

Figure I-6: Students with whom the Homeroom Teacher Held Personal Talks Very Frequently, by Risk Indicator 46

Figure I-7: Students with whose Parents the Teacher was in Contact (Discussion or Home Visit), by Risk Indicator 46

Figure I-8: Students about whom the Teacher had Consulted with Professionals at Least Once in the Previous Month, by Risk Indicator 47

Figure I-9: Students Referred to or Receiving Professional Therapy, by Risk Indicator 47