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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

## Evaluation of the Family Literacy Initiative of UJA-Federation of New York Final Report

Liat Vazan-Sikron ♦ Brachi Ben Simon ♦ Miriam Cohen-Navot

The study was funded by UJA-Federation of New York



RESEARCH REPORT

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# Executive Summary

## 1. Background

In September 2008, UJA-Federation of New York initiated the Family Literacy Initiative (FLI) in Israel to develop and implement family literacy groups for families of children from birth to 3 years old in Jewish and Arab disadvantaged neighborhoods. The main goals of the initiative were to improve the language and literacy skills of parents and children, and to improve children's school readiness and achievement in school, as a key to future success.

Six organizations received grants to implement family literacy programs: JDC-Ashalim, Keren Karev, the NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, the Ramla Community Center, the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (AJEEC), and the Benjamin Children's Library.

To achieve the FLI goals, the organizations set a number of specific objectives:

- ◆ Developing awareness among parents about the importance of promoting language and literacy among young children and a broader understanding of what this entailed
- ◆ Providing tools to promote language and literacy at home
- ◆ Enriching parent-child interaction, especially in the context of literacy
- ◆ Empowering the parents as key players in the education of their children
- ◆ Strengthening knowledge and tools for literacy development among daycare staff and preschool teachers<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter: early childhood workers).

## 2. Goals and Methodology of the Evaluation

The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute was asked to undertake an evaluation of the 3-year FLI pilot. The goals of the evaluation were to assist in the development and implementation of the project and to provide the basis for decisions about its expansion and further dissemination.

Specifically, the objectives of the evaluation were:

- ◆ To examine the implementation and development of the programs in the FLI
- ◆ To examine the perceived impacts on the participants: parents, children and early childhood workers.

Clearly, the FLI's long-term goal of achieving better integration into first grade for the children can only be examined well after the programs have ended. Therefore, the evaluation focused on more immediate, shorter-term objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the programs also included early childhood workers in the target population.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages over a three-year period from 2008-2011:

- ◆ Stage 1 – November 2008 through November 2009: The evaluation started as the provider organizations began implementing their family literacy programs. Data were collected about implementation during the first year and participants were interviewed after they had completed the programs. The Interim Report on the First Year of the Initiative<sup>2</sup> was submitted in November 2009.
- ◆ Stage 2 – October 2010 through November 2011: The second stage of the evaluation was postponed to the third year of implementation in order to examine the programs as they reached the final stage of development over the course of the 3-year pilot.

Both stages of the evaluation used qualitative and quantitative research methods, including:

- ◆ In-depth interviews with the directors of the provider organizations and group facilitators
- ◆ Self-administrated questionnaires to group facilitators during the first year of the pilot
- ◆ Session report forms that were completed following a sample of sessions with the families
- ◆ Parent telephone survey among a sample of parents during the first year of the pilot, and a self-administered questionnaire for all participants during the third year
- ◆ Focus groups with parents and early childhood workers who participated in the program
- ◆ Telephone interviews with parents who left the program before it ended.

### 3. Program Implementation

The examination of the implementation was based on the following data sources: Session report forms, which the facilitators were asked to complete with regard to 4 randomly chosen meetings,<sup>3</sup> interviews with program directors and facilitators, and focus groups with participants.

Although the pilot lasted three years, each year was independent, with the programs opening to new participants annually. Between the first and third years of implementation, the number of families participating increased considerably – from 180 to 310. In addition, some 100 early childhood workers participated in the third year. The duration of participation varied from 3-9 months across the different programs.

Three main types of programs were implemented:

- ◆ ***Joint programs for parents and children***, which emphasized hands-on, experiential activity. These programs were implemented throughout the school year, in the form of one-hour

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<sup>2</sup> Stern, A.; Girsh, Y. and Cohen-Navot, M. 2009. *Interim Report on the First Year of the Initiative*. Jerusalem: Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute.

<sup>3</sup> An average was calculated for each program and then the total of all the programs was calculated by taking an average of the separate program results. In this way, each program was equally represented in the total.

weekly meetings (Playing Together, implemented by JDC-Ashalim; Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library; and the Karev program).

- ◆ ***Parent-only programs***, which focused on imparting knowledge to enable parents and early childhood workers to promote literacy among the children. These were short-term programs (about 3 months), comprising about 10 longer meetings, each of about 2 hours (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, and Family Literacy Program of AJEEC).
- ◆ ***Programs for early childhood workers***, which trained early childhood workers to work better with the children in the daycare/preschool frameworks and to provide guidance to the families with regard to literacy. These programs were conducted in conjunction with other programs (Always a Story, implemented by NCJW and the Ramla Community Center, and Success Begins at Home, implemented by the Benjamin Library and the Family Literacy Program of AJEEC).

***Recruitment methods:*** The families were recruited through three main channels: outreach to families in the community, referral by local services, and word of mouth. Recruitment by publicizing the programs was used chiefly by programs for parents and children at community centers.

Early childhood workers were recruited by the director of early childhood services in the municipality (the NCJW program) and the inspector of the local daycare centers association (the Benjamin Library). The program was provided as a compulsory in-service training course for early childhood workers and was implemented in conjunction with their employers.

***Attendance:*** Parent-child groups averaged 25 participants (10 parents, 10 children up to age three and 5 older children). Parent-only groups averaged 10 participants. As in the first year of the pilot, most of the mothers (approximately 80%) reported that they came to all or most of the meetings.

***Range of Activities:*** Both the parent-child programs and the parent-only programs shared similar activities, including:

- ◆ *Book reading*, including the discussion on the importance of books and ways of reading that support language development
- ◆ *Play*, whether in groups or between parents and children
- ◆ *Talking with the children*, either through actual conversations with the children or explanations about how to conduct conversations.

***Main topics:*** A number of topics were found to be common to most of the programs:

- ◆ Using tools to develop language
  - Introduction to literacy activities such as reading to the child, singing and playing hand games, using rhymes, naming objects and classifying objects in groups

- Acquaintance with age-appropriate reading material and games
- Using common household items in working with the child
- ◆ Using daily activities to develop literacy
- ◆ Child and language development – theories and approaches
- ◆ Parenting and parent-child relations.

In addition, there were differences among the programs in the extent to which they emphasized the importance of promoting parent-child relations.

Both the parent-child programs and the parent-only programs worked in groups with the parents or with the parents and children together. In addition, the parent-child programs also provided opportunities to work with the parents and their child on a one-on-one basis.

Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the program format, number and duration of meetings, and with the accessibility of the meeting place. Almost all parents noted that the atmosphere was pleasant and that they enjoyed the meetings. The parents also reported high satisfaction with the professionalism of the staff and their caring attitude toward group members.

The groups for early childhood workers were similar to the parents-only groups, with a focus on lectures regarding literacy and child development and recommended activities, books, and games. These groups also allocated time for group discussion and advice from the facilitators about difficulties experienced at the day care and preschools, such as setting boundaries, creating structured daily activities schedule, and children's behavioral problems. The early childhood workers were also very satisfied with the program and its facilitators.

#### 4. Key Developments over the Course of the Pilot

The evaluation identified a number of changes that had been introduced in the programs between the first and third years. The first evaluation report highlighted that each organization had developed an approach based on its own interpretation of family literacy, as set out in UJA-Federation of New York's initial Request for Proposal. These findings contributed to recognition of the need to establish a clearer, more precise articulation of the concept of "*family literacy*," so as to plan the strategy for implementing the activities.

As a result, a *learning collaborative* was established, to enable program directors to work together to formulate a model of family literacy that included shared core principles and practices.<sup>4</sup> This group met over the course of the second year, and produced important results for the program. Participants in the learning collaborative felt the experience was significant, as it

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<sup>4</sup> The learning collaborative was led by Dr. Anat Stavans of NCJW and Prof. Liliana Tolchinsky an external consultant. A report was published and presented to UJA-Federation of New York: Tolchinsky, L. and Stavans, A. 2010. *Family Literacy – Collaborative Learning Group*. Final Report. Jerusalem: The NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

gave them deeper insight into issues of family literacy. The directors reported that their concept of home literacy became much more developed, and shaped their strategy for implementing their programs. The collaborative also contributed to developing a common approach for promoting literacy. Some of the changes that resulted from this collaborative were:

- ◆ **Standardized work practices:** The programs began to implement their programs in a more uniform format. For example, all programs began to hold weekly meetings, and all of the programs with parent-child groups allocated time to work with parents separately.
- ◆ **Modifications** were made to the programs to focus more directly on family literacy and be more effective. For example, the programs introduced work with early childhood workers in some of the programs, made personnel changes (recruitment of facilitators with background in the field of early childhood and group-work rather than diagnosis and therapy), and provided more-focused training on literacy for the facilitators.

Another modification was the greater focus on promoting the language skills of the children. In contrast to the first year, when the emphasis was on encouraging any form of parent-child interaction, during the third year the programs emphasized interactions that specifically focused on literacy. This was achieved by increasing the parents' awareness of ways to work and developing interaction with their children in a way that would enrich their language as well as by demonstrating and discussing literacy experience at the meetings

- ◆ **A better match was achieved between participants and the target population:** All of the programs in the FLI were for children from birth to 3 and their caregivers (parents or early childhood workers). Nevertheless, during the first year of the pilot some of the programs had extended the age limit to 5. In the third year, the target population was much clearer, and most of the mothers came to the meetings with at least one child age 3 and under.

In addition, the program was designed to focus on groups in localities with low socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, findings from the first year revealed that program participants were often employed, had often continued their education beyond high school, and had good command of their mother tongue. In the third year, the participants were characterized by noticeably lower levels in all these regards. For example, only a third of the mothers were wage earners. About half of the mothers had a limited educational background: 30% of the mothers reported that they had no schooling or only an elementary education and 18% completed vocational high school with no further education. Among Arab participants, education and employment levels were especially low.

In sum, the findings from the third year of program implementation indicate that the similarities across the programs increased, as they shared common goals, topics and activities for delivering the contents, and target populations.

## 5. Program Strengths

The evaluation of the Family Literacy Initiative identified a number of positive characteristics of the way in which the programs were implemented.



- ◆ ***Economic considerations:*** The cost per participant was modest, thus making the programs an effective model for reaching relatively large numbers of mothers and children.
- ◆ ***Cultural sensitivity:*** The programs were successful in adapting to the specific background of the participants (for example, Bedouin families in the Negev).
- ◆ ***Utilization of community facilities:*** Many of the programs used existing community facilities such as play centers, public libraries, and community centers. Doing so encouraged awareness of the programs among residents and avoided the stigma that might be attached to a treatment agency.
- ◆ ***Effective use of organizational resources:*** Having the programs embedded within existing multi-service organizations allowed them to draw on organizational resources, without having to create entirely new structures. It also provided a pool of referrals to the program, because families were already familiar with the larger organizations.
- ◆ ***Use of home visits:*** The Karev program was conducted primarily in the homes of the participants to create an intimate learning environment, encourage parent-child interactions in a familiar environment, and enable participants to use available books toys, games, and other household objects.

## 6. Difficulties in Implementing the Program

The evaluation identified a number of difficulties in how the programs were implemented:

- ◆ ***Difficulties in marketing the program:*** The directors reported that the subject of the program made it difficult to market, because parents perceived the term "literacy" to mean preparation for reading and writing in school only, whereas they were often more concerned about other aspects of parenting. This created some tensions between the programs' actual focus and the parents' desire to focus on more general parenting issues.
- ◆ ***Difficulties in retaining participants:*** During the third year of the pilot, an average of 15% of all participants dropped out. Parents who left the program reported that they did so because of lack of time, the need to find a babysitter when the parents came alone, and dissatisfaction with aspects of the program (size of the groups, and how the meetings were facilitated).
- ◆ ***Difficulties in targeting the "right" ages:*** Despite the program being intended for children from birth to age 3, mothers and early childhood workers reported that the program was typically oriented more toward children 18 months and older and less towards younger infants. This mismatch was magnified by the participation of older children in activities, despite the program's original parameters. The participation of the older children was allowed to enable mothers to attend without having to arrange a babysitter. The unintended consequence of this, as reported by participating mothers, was overcrowding in the groups and domination by the older children during activities. (By the third year, this problem was somewhat reduced, but still remained an issue for some programs.)
- ◆ ***Difficulty in creating a distinct program within a larger service framework:*** Though the benefits of having programs be part of a broader multi-service were noted earlier, there were

also challenges with this arrangement. In particular, some programs found it difficult to differentiate themselves from other programs in terms of main goals and contents. At these programs, attention should be paid to presenting the program to participants in a clear way and in making the program distinctive from other programs and services that are part of the larger organization. Such clarity and structure can contribute to more effective learning.

- ◆ ***Difficulties in adequate ways to encourage implementation of program material at home:*** Despite the development of a clearer approach regarding literacy promotion, and the standardization of many aspects of the activities, program staff at all levels still reported the need for additional training. Program directors noted that they were still in the process of learning about how best to convey the topic of literacy and reported a need for additional expert advice. In particular, they were concerned with finding better ways to ensure that parents were able to apply the lessons from the program at home.

## 7. Assessment of Program Impact by the Participants

The participating parents and early childhood workers reported that the program had a positive impact on their understanding of literacy. The following are some of the highlights of their responses as reflected in the survey of parents and the focus groups with parents and early childhood workers.

- ◆ ***Understanding/awareness of the importance of literacy and language enrichment:*** Parents and early childhood workers reported that they had become more keenly aware of the importance of interaction with the children as a way of enriching their language.
- ◆ ***Acquiring new information and skills:*** About 90% of the mothers in all of the programs noted that they had learned ways to enrich their children's language, to tell them a story, to have a conversation and to play with them, read together and sing together. Early childhood workers also reported they acquired new information about ways of enriching language and literacy promotion in daycare frameworks. Both parents and early childhood workers explained that they were more thoughtful and deliberate in the way they read stories to children.
- ◆ ***Applying the knowledge acquired at home and in early childhood frameworks:*** The parents were given a list of literacy activities and asked to indicate whether there had been a change in the extent to which they performed them with the children since joining the program. The list included activities such as reading, singing and playing together as well as activities related to interaction and conversation with the children, such as making an effort to answer their questions and providing explanations. Between 75% and 85% of the participants, depending on the program, reported change (doing much more than before or a little more than before). Importantly, a much higher percentage of mothers in the third year than in the first year, reported that they were now conducting activities "much more" since joining the program.

The early childhood workers also reported that they performed more literacy activities in the daycare frameworks.

- ◆ ***The groups as a source of support and advice:*** Mothers appreciated the opportunity to get together with other mothers and share similar concerns about parenting and literacy. The early childhood workers appreciated the opportunity to learn from their colleagues, to exchange ideas and share with them common difficulties and dilemmas that arose in their daily work. They also cited the benefits of having the opportunity to receive expert advice.

In both years of implementation, Arab Israeli participants reported higher levels of positive impact. This might have been because Arab families typically began the program at a lower starting point with regard to the quality and quantity of literacy interaction with their children.

## **8. Long-term Sustainability and Dissemination**

Following the 3-year pilot, the six programs funded by New York UJA-Federation's Family Literacy Initiative are now considering long-term sustainability and dissemination. The challenge of promoting early childhood development and literacy and school readiness in particular are issues of growing concern to Israeli policy makers and professionals. On the basis of the pilot, a number of key factors indicate the program's capacity for further development and dissemination:

***Factors relating to the program itself:*** Over the course of the pilot, a common approach to family literacy has evolved. In addition, the organizations have been successful in implementing the programs and involving significant numbers of participants.

***Factors relating to the nature of the implementing organization:*** The organizational mechanisms to promote sustainability for the programs were already created in the planning stages.

- ◆ The program has significantly contributed to developing the organizational capacity of organizations that are major players in the field of early childhood development and that can share widely what they have learned.
- ◆ Moreover, all programs were implemented by organizations that provide additional programs.
- ◆ The fact that some of the programs are implemented under the umbrella of multi-service comprehensive initiatives (Ashalim, in the context of Better Together and New Beginnings and Karev in the context of New Beginnings) increases the likelihood of their continuation and dissemination.
- ◆ The other participating organizations are also considering ways to become part of these broader comprehensive initiatives.

### **Further Steps Planned by the Organizations**

To leverage the program and create support in the community, some of the organizations reported that they were planning to undertake various steps to disseminate knowledge and stimulate awareness of the importance of family literacy programs among professionals. These steps include: in-service courses and training for coordinators of services and other organizations

working in early childhood; the production of educational materials about ways of promoting parents-child literacy.

Thus, the organizations have expressed a high interest in continuing and have a number of strengths on which to build. At the same time, they express the view that they have not yet reached the stage of developing alternative sources of funding and therefore the continuation of the program remains an open issue.

## 9. Directions for Strengthening the Program

Between the first and third years of the program, the learning collaborative was set up to establish shared principles and practices for the FLI. In the third year, the Initiative reached over 300 families and some 100 early childhood workers in underprivileged communities in Israel. The programs succeeded in raising the participants' awareness of the importance of promoting literacy and language for very young children and knowledge about how to enhance literacy activities at home and in daycare centers and preschools. They also made an important contribution to the development of methods for implementing early childhood literacy programs in Israel that can be widely used by other organizations.

In conclusion, the following are among the implications of the findings for ways of strengthening the program as the organizations pursue efforts to sustain the program and to disseminate it more broadly.

- ◆ ***Continued consolidation of the intervention approach:*** The program directors noted the need to continue to work together to further consolidate the intervention approach and their expertise in this area. Further meetings of the group could contribute to this process. For example, the possibility of creating a more unified curriculum with mandatory topics to be included in all family literacy programs was raised. Still, alongside the endeavor to create a core-shared approach, it is also important that the organizations continue to adapt their specific programs to their particular organizational context, participants' needs, and so forth.
- ◆ ***Providing program staff with additional training:*** The directors noted the need for further training of facilitators in the area of family literacy. This is particularly essential for the programs whose staff members have a background mainly in early childhood and not necessarily in literacy development. As noted by some of the directors, thought should be given to setting up a training program led by a professional or an organization specializing in this area.
- ◆ ***Finding ways to increase participation:*** Program staff reported difficulties in recruiting participants and ensuring participation throughout the program. In further program development, it is important to continue address these challenges. Some possible strategies include better "marketing" about the importance of family literacy, closer ties with other community services for the purpose of referrals, and finding ways to make it easier for mothers to attend without their other children.

- ◆ ***Focus on the defined target population of the program:***
  - Over the three years of the pilot, there was an increase in the number of participating families from a lower socioeconomic background. The importance of actually reaching the population for which the programs have been designed must be emphasized. The study findings, which reveal that the perceived contributions were greater among parents with lower education and employment characteristics (e.g., Bedouin mothers), underline the importance of focusing on this population.
  - Similarly, during the pilot, there was increasing focus on children from birth to 3. It is important for this trend, which is in keeping with the Initiative goals, to continue.
- ◆ ***Addressing the needs of children 18 months and younger:*** Parents and early childhood workers reported that greater emphasis was put on activities and content suitable for children aged 2-3, and less for infants up to eighteen months. There is a need to strengthen the content for the younger children.
- ◆ ***Emphasizing the unique character of the program:*** Some of the programs had difficulty distinguishing the Initiative from other similar programs. It is important to make the unique objectives and goals clear to participants in these programs. Clarifying this distinction and structuring the programs could contribute to a more effective learning process.
- ◆ ***Continuity and dissemination of the program:*** The program is now at the stage where it is ripe for discussion about broader dissemination, taking advantage of the knowledge that has accumulated and the strong points of the implementing organizations, which have enabled them to promote the subject significantly. The program directors brought up different ideas, such as incorporating the program within comprehensive initiatives, creating additional training programs, and disseminating knowledge about early childhood literacy among professionals in the community.

It is important to develop a strategy for obtaining the funding and organizational support required to ensure continuation and expansion of the activities. Continued efforts to formulate the program goals and operating principles could help place them on the public agenda and gain support from professionals working in the community services. These efforts to ensure long-term funding and implementation could be done both in the context of the programs currently implemented and in the context of the Initiative in general.

In conclusion, UJA-Federation provided support to six major organizations in the field of early childhood development to enable them to introduce family literacy programs targeting ages birth to three, a critical age in language development that was underdeveloped for this age group. By piloting programs and then developing the "Learning Collaborative," which brought together key professionals, UJA and the implementing organizations have made a contribution to the field in Israel, which now has great potential to grow, particularly in light of the great interest in early childhood development in Israel, as evidenced, inter alia, by two government decisions made last year that could constitute a platform for further dissemination of the Initiative. The first decision concerns the National Program for Children and Youth at Risk, which, at the time of writing, has

been allocated significant additional state funding for further expansion and implementation. The second decision concerns the recommendations of the Trachtenberg Committee for socioeconomic change, which was set up following the social protest that erupted in Israel in the summer of 2011. The committee has recommended that the government increase its commitment and responsibility for activities for children aged 3-4, gradually widening the age-bracket to include birth to 3. These steps indicate the current trend in Israeli society of placing greater emphasis on early childhood, which constitutes a foundation on which to continue to utilize and disseminate the knowledge of family literacy in early childhood.



## Update

At the conclusion of the four years of funding made available to the six organizations, UJA is currently supporting two training initiatives with the intention of disseminating the acquired knowledge and skill sets to a wide range of professionals leading the field of early education throughout Israel.

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