Pilot Intervention Program to Support After-School Staff in Implementing Agency, Co-Agency, and the Strengths-Based Approach: A Learning Process in Six Centers

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Abstract

Background

As part of the development of the "Moadoniot 2030" model, JDC-Ashalim, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Education implemented a pilot intervention program to support staff in six after-school centers (hereinafter: the program).

The program was designed to integrate the professional concepts of agency and co-agency and strength-based practice into routine work by providing staff with a shared professional language, tools, and practices for identifying and strengthening children's strengths, expanding their opportunities for choice, enabling them to influence processes, encouraging joint activities among children, and strengthening their sense of partnership.

The program and the learning process in the after-school centers were supported by the "Peer to Peer" group, which includes board members and supporters from the United States and Israel who jointly initiate and promote innovative responses in partnership with JDC-Ashalim.

Objective

The learning process was designed to examine the implementation and integration of the professional concepts of agency, co-agency, and strength-based practice in the participating after-school centers; the changes that, according to participants, occurred in the counselors' practices and among the children; and factors that facilitated or hindered the integration of these concepts into routine work.

Methodology

The learning process used a qualitative methodology. It included two semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the six counselors in the after-school centers, one at the beginning of the program and one at its conclusion; interviews with the two program facilitators at the end of the program; and visits to three centers during the program.

Main Findings

Implementation

The program's implementation demonstrates how professional concepts take shape in routine practice, under the unique conditions of each after-school center.

- Implementation developed as a flexible process, tailored to each center.
- Building trust with staff and becoming familiar with the local context provided a foundation for effective implementation.
- The professional concepts were translated into concrete practices that were incorporated into the routine of the after-school centers.

The Program's Impact on the Counselors

According to staff members, the counselors' and housemothers' experience of the concepts they were expected to apply with the children contributed to a significant change in how they viewed themselves and their work.

- The facilitation process strengthened the counselors' and housemothers' self-efficacy and their recognition of the knowledge and strengths they bring to their work.
- The program raised awareness of emotional and educational work that had sometimes been intuitive.
- Applying co-agency among after-school staff strengthened collaboration within the team and recognition of each member's unique contribution.

Applying the Concepts with Children

Agency, co-agency, and strength-based practice were most fully integrated when they were incorporated into tailored experiential activities that enabled children to experience these ideas firsthand.

- Agency was expressed in expanded opportunities for children to choose, lead, and influence within a clear framework.
- Co-agency was expressed through mutual assistance, division of roles, and joint action, particularly in group projects.

- Strength-based practice helped children identify their own strengths and helped staff recognize those strengths even in situations involving challenging behavior, thereby creating opportunities for children to express their strengths and experience success in center activities.

Implementation and Integration Challenges

The main challenge was sustaining the integration of new professional concepts and practices into the routine of the after-school centers over time.

- Workload, insufficient time and staffing, and employment conditions made it difficult to embed new practices in routine work.
- The tools and materials required flexible use tailored to the children's ages, circumstances, and group characteristics.
- Differences in the professional support available to the after-school centers and their reliance on external guidance highlighted the need for local mechanisms to ensure ongoing support and continuity.

Recommended Principles for Action

The findings of the learning process suggest six complementary principles for the continued development of the program and its expansion into additional after-school centers. These principles may also be relevant to other settings operating within community-based services for children, provided they are adapted to the characteristics of the service, population, and local context.

1. Build trust between the facilitator and staff and become familiar with the local context at the outset of implementation.
2. Work with staff through experience, reflection, and practice.
3. Develop a flexible toolkit tailored to the characteristics of the children and group and use projects as an implementation mechanism.
4. Provide dedicated time, sufficient staffing, and readily available professional support.
5. Develop local mechanisms to sustain implementation and plan a gradual transition from external support to routine work in the center.
6. Incorporate systematic observation, professional support, and ongoing evaluation of how the professional concepts are implemented.