

Integrative Analysis of the Body of Knowledge and Research on JDC-Ashalim's Activities in the Field of Education, 2013-2023: Socioeconomic Mobility and Applied Social Research

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Abstract

Background

JDC-Ashalim (hereafter, Ashalim) was created in 1998 as a partnership between JDC-Israel and the Israeli government in order to develop programs and services for children, youth, and young adults at risk. In recent years, it has become evident that, in Israel, one's opportunities and chances of success in adulthood in various areas of life, especially level of education and quality of employment, are significantly dependent upon where you were born and the socioeconomic status of your parents. In 2018, following a new strategic planning initiative, Ashalim began a shift from the concept of preventing risk situations and addressing their effects to one of promoting socioeconomic mobility – emphasizing expanding opportunities for children, youth, and young adults to improve their social status compared to that of their parents.

Over the past decade (2013-2023), Ashalim commissioned and funded dozens of research projects, including evaluation studies and other research and data products, to identify best practices in various aspects of life. However, as these research and knowledge products were not collected, organized and made accessible, Ashalim did not rely on them systematically, affecting its ability to identify trends in its own work over the years and to analyze the expected impact of its efforts.

To strengthen its abilities in this regard, Ashalim commissioned the Myers-Joint-Brookdale Institute's research team to conduct an integrative study of research carried out for Ashalim over the past decades in the various areas in which it operates. The present study focuses on the field of education (including both formal and informal education, as well as family and community contexts), from birth to age 18. Both the analysis of the research products and the written report address this diverse body of research in an overview based on a variety of activity areas, age groups, target populations, intervention methods and research methods related to the research outputs. This overview makes it possible to identify similarities and differences between the various activities, analyze change processes over the years, and present Ashalim's accumulated contribution to both the theory and practice of promoting socioeconomic mobility in Israel. It also highlights the potential contribution of the body of research and knowledge for Ashalim's future activities in the field of education.

Objectives

This integrative study is designed to consolidate insights from the accumulated products of a decade of research commissioned by Ashalim in the field of education in a format accessible to professionals and decision makers in order to:

1. Assist in the continued development of Ashalim's organizational strategy in the field of education and in adapting it to ongoing and new needs
2. Lay the groundwork for assessing the effectiveness of innovative interventions in the field of education and their long-term and large-scale impact

Method

The study is based on an analysis of forty research products related to the field of education either commissioned by Ashalim or conducted by or with its staff in 2013-2023. The analysis included mapping the products in terms of content and methodology and eliciting insights and recommendations for future research and knowledge activities. To refine these insights and recommendations, interviews were conducted with the heads of the four education areas in Ashalim: early childhood, school years, adolescence, and the challenges of the education system. The interviews, analysis and writing were conducted in January-September 2023.

Select Findings

The concept of mobility as articulated in the research and knowledge products: Examining the outputs indicates a developing concept of a two-way relationship between risk and social mobility, rather than a clear shift over the decade from the approach of preventing risk situations and addressing their impact to one of promoting socioeconomic mobility.

Over the last decade, Ashalim has dealt with marginalized groups with low potential for mobility (ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs, and other groups from Israel's socio-geographical periphery), along with groups requiring special attention (children with disabilities or personal and family difficulties). The research products show the development of the perception that low likelihood of mobility is a risk factor, and that background characteristics, including individual and family risk factors, are among the causes of low mobility. While we see different practices in the various areas of Ashalim's work in the field of education, in all areas of Ashalim's activity we see an increase in interventions that focus on two aspects considered to predict high mobility: on the level of the individual – developing qualifications and skills that promote an optimal adult life, and on the ecosystemic level –

strengthening the professional human capital and the educational environment so as to provide all students with optimal conditions for development.

Research in support of activity in the field of education. The research and knowledge products were produced by different methods, and the information they provide can be put to use by the Ashalim staff and its partners among professionals and policymakers. The products include recommendations on improving the implementation of models and interventions and on steps required to prepare the dissemination of the models and to promote influence on policymaking. They also include evidence regarding changes that occurred among the beneficiaries of interventions during and immediately following the interventions, as well as evidence of ecosystemic changes, both of which reinforce the change theories informing the interventions. Finally, the products provide up to date knowledge and data from Israel and around the world, which together with the findings of evaluation studies and the consolidation of learning from Ashalim's ongoing activity, may serve as a foundation for developing an overall intervention strategy and for formulating policies.

In terms of learning about influence and impact, it appears that although the evaluation studies provide considerable evidence for changes that occurred among the beneficiaries of interventions, in most cases, the research designs do not enable us to attribute these changes to the influence of the intervention alone. Moreover, evidence from all the studies was not collected systematically to enable making presumptions about the influence of similar interventions. As for the measurement of impact (long-term and large-scale influence), the interviews with the area heads of Ashalim attested to the large-scale impact of Ashalim's work. However, the body of research and knowledge hardly dealt with the systematic monitoring of these impacts.

Recommendations

- Continue learning about the contribution of research to Ashalim's activity and to its overall policy
- Determine the appropriate mix of research questions and methodologies
- Improve the ability to identify the impact of Ashalim's work by
 - Defining areas of life, spheres of influence and geographic areas where Ashalim is significantly engaged
 - Determining shared indicators for various areas and different programs to be used in research and ongoing measurement systems implemented in programs and educational settings
 - Identifying national databases that can be used as an ongoing source of data indicating impact on large-scale populations in terms of the predetermined indicators
 - Defining methods of collecting and analyzing information and of drawing lessons based on the entire range of information sources