

A HEAD-START TUTORING PROGRAM FOR IMMIGRANT PRESCHOOLERS: THE CASE OF ETHIOPIANS IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

This article describes the development and implementation of an intervention program for at-risk pre-school children from an immigrant community. The program presents a preventive curriculum which aims to reduce some of the risk-factors experienced by such populations when they encounter a western-oriented school in the dominant culture. The intervention is a head-start program intended to be carried out in the child's home before official kindergarten. This is a tutoring program which recruits high-school students from the same community and trains them to work with the young children in a process of mediating language and literacy activities in the dominant language.

Keywords: head-start, tutoring, preschoolers, language mediation, pre-literacy and numeracy skills

1. Introduction

Israel is a country that defines itself by immigration, with a welcoming policy for returning Jews to the homeland. Immigrants from many different countries in the world have prayed for generations to return to their original home. In the last seventy years there has been a continuing flow of immigration waves. This is also true of the heritage migration from Ethiopia: both the receiving community and the newcomers perceived it as a return to the "promised land".

Most of the Ethiopian immigrants come from rural villages with poor written landscapes and had leaned for generations on traditional oral culture (Ben Ezer, 1992; Levin-Rozalis, 2000). They practiced biblical Judaism, but had very little knowledge about modern Israeli culture and lifestyle. Due to the stress of immigration and the extensive differences between the rural culture of their country of origin, many Ethiopian immigrants suffered culture shock.

The inclusion of the Ethiopian population into Israeli citizenship is not an easy process. Adjustment to Israeli lifestyle takes time and creates the constant struggle

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between a strong will to accept and adopt the dominant culture and identity and at the same time maintain the indigenous identity and values. Subjective and group experiences of discrimination affect perceptions of well-being and have been documented in migration research (e.g. Liebkind, et al, 2004). To date, this is a relatively small community, less than 150,000, often characterized by limited economic and socio-cultural resources, and limited representation and participation in Israeli culture.

Any older generation of migrants finds it difficult to assimilate in the new society and often fails to do so. Yet, all parents hope that their children will fully integrate and attain a better life as a result of migration. But, young children also encounter great difficulties in the school system. The immigrant child who comes to school for the first time, often finds the school culture strange and unaccommodating and his or her readiness is limited in comparison to the local children from the host society. Some of the insufficient readiness is related to the fact that school is in a new language and some factors are related to literacy readiness which may be lacking in the home. Head-start programs developed specifically for school-readiness can help immigrant children integrate more easily.

The Head-Start program described the current paper, known as the NETA project, is based on tutoring: two tutors, high-school students visit the target child in his/her home twice a week and spend an hour and a half reading and telling stories, playing games and carrying out different paper and pencil activities. This program began in 2010 and at present is more limited due to less funding available; the tutor trainers have volunteer to continue to work with the tutors

2. The target community

The target community in this study is a particular group of Amharic speaking families in the town of Yavneh. In each family we identified one child of 3-5 years old, usually born in Israel to an immigrant family. We defined these children as being at-risk with respect to school readiness since Shany, et al. (2010) found a cumulative effect of poverty, oral home culture, parental inability to mediate language and literacy in the dominant language, etc. resulting in serious gaps for these children in the Israeli school system, thus interfering with their achievements and successful integration in school. Most Ethiopian children are in “Religious State Schools” since the Ethiopian community is by and large observant. This was supposed to allow for easier integration into the new system, yet findings indicate worrisome outcomes: there is obvious failure of these children to integrate, many of the Ethiopian students remain socially isolated, they are not culturally understood by the teachers and they develop a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem.

The population in Yavneh is 35,000 and 13% of this number makes up the Ethiopian community (approximately 900 families). About 200 Ethiopian children are under the age of 5. Old timers in the Yavneh community in cooperation with Ethiopian leaders established a special organization called the Tasfachin Association, intended to facilitate and enhance the integration of Ethiopian Youth in the community. The main mission for this organization is to provide support for youngsters to develop their potentials by succeeding in school. Therefore, they provide afternoon activities for all ages enabling students to do their homework and participate in enrichment activities relevant to the age and school requirements. Professional teachers volunteer to lead these activities and create a pleasant and engaging environment. Furthermore, the participant children receive food during the after school hours.

The intervention program described here is the result of cooperation between the NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education at the Hebrew University and the Tasfachin Association, with funding from private donors. The aims of this intervention was to address some of the issues mentioned above with special emphasis on verbal mediation and early literacy skills for these young children, to be carried out in the dominant language, Hebrew. The main goal of the intervention was to work with preschoolers in order to strengthen their school readiness.

The decision to develop a tutoring program was based on the understanding that these children would benefit from an interaction where they were the center, and all activities were directed towards them as individuals. Furthermore, it was assumed that they would easily accept young students from their own community, who look like them and who know the culture and the background. It was also easier for the parents to entrust their children to young people from their own community.

The decision to assign two tutors to each home was based on the understanding that this type of tutoring requires careful preparation but also ability to adjust to changes and unexpected encounters in the home situation. Therefore, two tutors can share the burden and the responsibility much better. They can also cooperate in the preparation of each session and in the process of reporting and evaluating the sessions.

3. School Readiness Programs

The improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (in the US, quoted in NCQTL) lays down the foundation for developing effective programs for populations at risk. Five important foci of such programs (among others) are mentioned in the Act:

1. *Social and Emotional Development* which emphasizes the need to create a comfortable and supporting environment for the children to take part in social activities suited to their age. The emotional development focuses on the need to ensure that each child feels comfortable to engage in the various tasks and has a positive image of his/her potential to be active and engaged. Children should develop a positive relationship with adults and with other children.
2. *Language Development and Literacy Engagement* is an important feature of such Head-Start programs. Children listen to narratives and retell them, they engage in vocabulary acquisition and expansion, they learn to make predictions and to develop hypotheses and they learn to interact socially in an appropriate manner according to socio-cultural norms.
3. *Focus on Learning*: activities in the intervention program should arouse interest in leaning. Children should develop ability to persist when working with various learning materials and they should gain an understanding of words and concepts related to learning. They should demonstrate eagerness, creativity and independence in their interactions.
4. *Cognition and General Knowledge*: preschoolers should have experience in numbers, counting, simple math and comparison activities, identification and organization. These are important preschool readiness skills. Children will use their skills in remembering information and in being aware of their own thinking.
5. *Physical well-being* is an important attribute for a child reaching school age. This is firstly relevant to control of muscles but it also has to do with personal hygiene, appropriate clothing, ability to organize one's belongings and self-confidence in engaging in relevant ventures.

These five components of a good head-start program were the basic principles on which we developed our NETA intervention project in Yavneh.

4. The NETA Project in Yavneh

It is generally accepted that the family literacy environment contributes significantly to the child's level of literacy and school readiness (Heath, 1982; Snow, 1991). This is true of any community but is particularly dominant in immigrant families. A large body of research points to the importance of providing early learning experiences that stimulate children's development (Ziegler and Black, 1989). This inspired us to develop an intervention program to be carried out in the homes of the target children.

The program aimed at the following:

- a. To develop a preschool preventive curriculum which will reduce risk-factors often found in socio-economically disadvantaged families.
- b. To provide children with basic pre-literacy skills in the second (the host) language and numeracy skills that will ensure their school-readiness in an attempt to overcome their disadvantage entry level to kindergarten (the first year of formal schooling).
- c. To provide children with a role-model from their own community – youngsters from Ethiopian background who are successful high-school students and who will act as their tutors.

There were three target populations in this project:

- a. **The children** – aged 2 to 5, who were expected to develop language, literacy, math and general learning skills suitable for their age. This would prepare them for kindergarten and give them a chance to start at a level similar to the children from the host community. For this purpose, materials had to be developed including books, games and other toys as well as evaluation instruments in order to assess their growth and development.
- b. **The tutors** – successful high-school students from Ethiopian background from 9th grade and up. For them the project provided multi-purposes: to learn to take responsibility, to learn to be on time, to develop literacy skills in planning their sessions with the children, reporting on the experience of tutoring and developing a good relationship with the parents. It was obvious that they needed intensive training for the task of tutoring.
- c. **The parents** – since the intervention sessions were taking place at home, parents were often present and aware of what was going on. They did not have to participate but if they were interested they could join the activities. The main objective of this project was to show parents how to interact with their children in activities that could enhance their readiness for school but most specifically how to verbally interact with the children. In the Ethiopian culture parents place great importance on the child's well-being but they don't tend to interact verbally as much as it is common in the Western world (Stavans, et al, 2009). Furthermore, they do not feel responsible for learning at school since they tend to relegate that role to the teachers and the school authorities.

5. The structure of the intervention program

The program was academically supervised by a Hebrew University team which consisted of a professor in language education, two kindergarten instructors (who have experience training kindergarten teachers) one volunteer coordinator and an Ethiopian professional bridge-maker who is in constant contact with the participating families. The role of the Ethiopian bridge-maker was particularly important in lowering the families' anxiety and feeling of intrusion. She met with the families regularly and explained the objectives to them and she recruited the participating families on a voluntary basis.

The program is based on two weekly meetings of two tutors with one child (or additional siblings) in each family's home. The tutors bring with them books, toys and worksheets and spend about an hour and a half with the target child. At the end of the session the tutors talk to the parents and answer any questions they may have concerning the program or the progress of their child.

Once a week all the tutors (usually 20 tutors working with 10 families) meet with their instructors in order to receive training and guidance in their work. In addition to these two-hour meetings the tutors have intensive workshops during vacation periods at least twice a year, for three or four consecutive days. These young tutors become para-professional trainers since they learn and develop both leadership skills and didactic approaches relevant to their role as tutors.

Three times during the school year the parents and the children meet with the tutors and the academic team for a fun-activity. During these periods parents form focus groups discussing the value of the intervention program.

For evaluation processes, the children take a battery of tests which will be described later in this paper, at the beginning of the intervention and again in the middle and at the end of the intervention in order to assess their overall progress. In addition, each tutor is interviewed and all the reports for each child are discussed.

6. A preschool preventive curriculum

A preschool preventive curriculum needs to address all the issues mentioned in the NCQTL (2011) document and discussed above. The main content elements are described below:

1. **Interaction with print** (Levin and Aram, 2012). In the western cultures children are exposed to print from the earliest age. There is print around them in the landscape and they are exposed to books before they can read or understand the content of these books. In a preventive curriculum this

type of constant exposure to print is very important and the tutors in our program bring along books and worksheets which expose children to print. This is particularly important in homes where print is usually limited.

2. **Story-telling.** Parents, grandparents, older siblings and other caretakers tend to tell stories either from books or from their own experience. Children exposed to story-telling become familiar with the structure of narratives from oral stories as well as from stories read to them. Reading from books is particularly important since children begin to recognize titles and captions and while leafing through the books they can predict and remember the events. In immigrant families it is often the case that parents stop telling stories even in their own language since they worry that the children may get confused between the old and the new language. That is why head-start programs should encourage story-telling both in the mother tongue and in the new language. These practices will enhance each other. The same book should be “read” many times and the child needs to become a partner in the story-telling. Eventually, children who are exposed to stories will be able to tell stories from pictures and from other elements available in their environment. It is the objective of this program to reach free story-telling by children.
3. **Using paper and pencil activities.** Before getting to school (or formal kindergarten) children need to develop the skill of holding a pencil and using it on paper. They should be given the opportunity to scribble, draw and play with pencil and paper. This has to be an integral part of the preventive curriculum. The worksheets, coloring activities, pasting and creating different forms enhance independence and cognitive development. Children are given the opportunity to compare, complete, choose, add and eliminate. Some typical content for this area are shapes, colors and sizes. Children can do a great variety of activities of cognitive value.
4. **Vocabulary Acquisition and Expansion.** Story-telling and many other games and activities allow for constant acquisition of new words and concepts. The reuse of important words or words that children are interested in, the meaningful context that co-occurs, clear and recognizable pronunciation, all help acquisition of vocabulary and the constant expansion of the active vocabulary stock. This vocabulary accumulation will be critical in helping children read in future grades.
5. **Oral Interaction between Tutor and Tutee.** Tutors are especially trained to expand and enrich their oral mediation. Telling the tutee what we are doing, how we can do it best, asking questions and providing feedback is on the one hand some compensation for the relatively limited verbal

interaction typical in family exchanges and on the other hand establishes some cultural norms for interpersonal interactions in the host society.

6. **Basic Numeracy Skills.** Children need to practice counting and using cardinal and ordinal numbers in a variety of contexts (Mevarech, 2008). They can learn to recognize written numbers at a fairly early age and they can do a variety of manipulations with numbers.
7. **Motivation and Fun in Learning.** Perhaps the most important school readiness element relates to the child's motivation to learn and the pleasure derived from knowledge.

In order to make sure that all the above topics of the curriculum are practiced with the children during the tutoring session they follow a basic sequence in each session: a warm-up beginning which involves some general talk which is focused on creating a pleasant atmosphere and an expression of interest and excitement, a story from a book, a game with building blocks or various shapes and colors or with a ball, some activity that requires movement and muscles control, a worksheet and the use of pencils and crayons and finally a leave taking and closure of the meeting. The tutors are instructed to try and include vocabulary work, or simple numeracy wherever possible. A good example of such integration is when two tutors play ball with a four- year-olds. As they throw the ball they count. When reaching ten they return to one. It seems that the little girl has mastered the first ten numbers so one of the tutor asks her "what comes after ten?" and she answers with certainty – "one". This makes sense since they were always returning to one after ten so now the tutor demonstrates counting till 15. When they are done with numbers they practice colors: what color shirt am I wearing? And so on. This constant integration of content with games provides a good opportunity to review the words and remember them and it is all a fun activity.

At the tutors meeting with the instructors the tutors have an opportunity to learn something new about words, games or math but also to plan their next two sessions with the child. They write it down, they act it out and then they report to the group. This is an important literacy cycle for the tutors. The tutors should always feel that they get to the session well prepared.

7. Findings

The findings relate to each of the three target populations. As mentioned earlier, the **children's progress** is evaluated with an "evaluation packet" for the beginning of the intervention and again at the end. This evaluation packet consists of five sections:

1. Math – counting in a variety of situations with different shapes and objects

2. Identifying colors in a variety of contexts
3. Identifying shapes and sizes
4. Recognizing vocabulary that has been encountered during the year
5. Telling a story based on a series of pictures

The tutors receive special training in administering these tests and they do it in a pleasant and relaxed manner yet paying close attention to the child's performance.

The findings at the end of two years showed the following:

1. The older group of children, those closer to the age of 5, gained full mastery of all the skills (80-100% on the performance). When compared to a group of children at the end of kindergarten (almost 6 years old) they performed very similarly. That means that they now acquired a head start level, and although they only begin kindergarten they can perform as well as those who finish.
2. The younger group (less than 4 or 4) have improved throughout the year but still need further activation.
3. All children are now used to working with the types of activities presented in the packet and all children are willing and happy to engage in such learning activities. When asked how they like the tutoring session they usually show happiness and interest.
4. The most interesting results are evident in the children's ability to tell a story from pictures. When we compare the story we find that children use a richer vocabulary, better connectors and a clear structure. Some of the children were even able to add dramatic elements to the story.

The findings related to the **tutors** were collected via questionnaires and personal interviews. Our expectations were that the tutors would improve their own literacy skills. They will learn to plan sessions and write brief reports, they will learn to take responsibility and develop positive and friendly relations with the children and the families. In the interviews with the tutors many of these things were mentioned. Here are some of the statements made by the tutors:

- I learned what it means to hold a job.
- I have become attached to a child that is not in my family.
- I learned to cope with unpredicted events
- I learned many new words, some are professional concepts.
- I have enjoyed the feeling of success: when my tutee does well I feel I have succeeded.
- I feel that I have more self-confidence today and I have learned a lot.
- I have a very good feeling because I think I am helping my community.

According to the reactions collected from the tutors it may very well be that they were a very important target population beyond the original expectations.

The third target group were **the parents**. They were present at the sessions and they often asked questions but they did not receive any special treatment. The data from the parents were collected in 'focus groups'. One of the issues that were central is how important it is to interact with the children during the leisure time at home. One mother said: "after watching the two girls work with my daughter, I feel I can play with her too. I make time now when I come home from work to spend time with her". Another mother said: "watching the girls work with my son and daughter made me think that I can do a lot of interesting things with them. I plan my time and think about it". And a father said; "I never used to talk much with my four- year- old son. I thought he was little and there wasn't much I can talk to him about. But now, when I walk with him on the street I always try to talk to him. I show him the traffic lights and I explain it to him. It is fun".

8. Discussion

From our findings in this study one can conclude that a well-planned intervention project has a great potential to succeed in preparing immigrant children for school. Guided instruction, play and mediation, can increase the chances of these children to reach school more prepared and feel that they are equal to their peers. Moreover, the young tutors seemed to be a very important target population as well and they benefited greatly from this project.

The Shany and Geva (2011) study showed that Ethiopian children performed equally to their peers on low level processing components, but some of the gaps persisted and even increased at higher level aspects of literacy that involve: **cultural knowledge, language skills and reading comprehension**. In our project we tried to prepare the children for cultural and linguistic features, but we would need to look into future development of these children. This may be a very worthwhile challenge at this point in order to assess long-term impact.

The unique aspect of this project is that it is home-based and that the tutors are youngsters from the same community. It is our hope that similar projects will be developed in other communities throughout the world. In this period of mass immigration all over the world, head start programs can greatly facilitate the integration of immigrant children into the host society and this can be done while at the same time maintaining the home culture and the home language.

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