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Early literacy policy and practice in Israel

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In this chapter we review the early literacy policy and practice in Israeli preschool education. First, we describe the early education structure. Second, we refer to the major characteristics of Hebrew that affect early literacy development and its promotion (for elaboration on the Arabic language, see Saiegh-Haddad and Everatt’s chapter in this book). Then, we overview the history of literacy promotion in Israel and focus on the New National Early Literacy Curriculum and its implementation. Finally, we discuss future challenges in the arena of early literacy.

The early education system

Israel’s early education system reveals a cultural and social diversity. About 75 per cent of the students are Jewish and attend Hebrew-speaking educational institutions and 25 per cent are Arab, Druze and Bedouin, who attend Arabic-speaking institutions. All the state preschools (Jewish and Arab) share the same curriculum, with adjustments to fit the different languages, cultures and religions. In this chapter we focus on Hebrew. In Israel, education is free and compulsory from age three. All the four- and five-year-olds and more than 90 per cent of three-year-olds study in pedagogically supervised educational settings and children go to first grade when they are six. Preschool classes contain up to 35 children (average 28). In each class the staff includes a certified early education teacher, usually holding a degree equivalent to a minimum bachelor’s degree, and a paraprofessional assistant. The vast majority of the state preschools operate as autonomous administrative units in a one-floor building with an attached playground. The teachers in each class are the pedagogical and administrative directors of their classes. Preschools operate from 8.00–14.00, six days a week.

Hebrew language characteristics: effects on early literacy development and promotion

Letters and letter knowledge

Hebrew is an abjad writing system, written from right to left. The alphabet comprises 22 square letters that represent consonants. Four of the letters serve the dual function of representing consonants and vowels. Five of the letters have different forms when they appear
at the end of a word. The letter names are acrophonic (e.g. letter SHIN begins with the phonemic sound that the letter represents – /sh/). Therefore, the letter names are powerful cues, highly effective in facilitating letter naming and spelling in preschools (Levin, 2007).

The unvowelled orthography is the default in Hebrew. The vowel indication can be added by means of diacritics and vowel letters. The diacritics provide a vowel for the preceding consonant and are marked mainly below the letter. The vowelled Hebrew (with the diacritics) has almost perfect grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence. Diacritics are used mainly in the Bible, poetry and children’s books. Children in preschool are exposed to scripts with and without diacritics. They learn to read in first grade using diacritics but they stop using them by the beginning of third grade. Young Hebrew speaking children represent consonants significantly more than vowels in their early writing and reading (Levin et al., 2013).

**Phonology**

Hebrew syllables’ structure is mainly CV and CVC. Hebrew does not include single phoneme words. This sound structure, along with the Hebrew orthography, explains children’s difficulty in isolating phonemic sounds (Share and Blum, 2005). When asked to report the sounds of printed letters or instructed to provide a phoneme, they often respond with a CV sound (Levin et al., 2006).

**Morphology**

Hebrew is characterized by derivational morphology, based on the ‘root-plus-pattern’ system. Typically, the root consists of three consonants and represents the base morpheme that carries the semantic core meaning of words. Appending prefixes or suffixes to the ‘root’ forms typical patterns for grammatical inflections such as gender, person, number and tense. Moreover, many function words (to, from, the, etc.) and possessives (my, his) are frequently affixed to both nouns and pronouns (Ravid, 2011). As a result of the morphemic density, a single word in Hebrew may be the equivalent of a full sentence. For example: AHAVTIA – I loved her. Studies have reported the significant and unique contribution of morphological awareness in preschool to children’s reading and spelling acquisition (Levin et al., 2001). Preschoolers are familiar with a large number of root-related word families, and make productive and mostly correct use of basic morphological forms.

**The history of early literacy promotion in Israel**

The early education system in Israel has always paid great attention to language but the content, extent and methods to promote language have been an ongoing debate. With the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), teaching Hebrew to young children was a part of the vision of reviving Hebrew as a ‘shared language’ that would unify Israel’s population of immigrants from more than 80 different countries. At this stage, preschool teachers had a unique role of imparting Hebrew language to children and through the children to their families. Emphasis was placed on enriching children’s oral language through conversations, songs, stories and rhymes in everyday activities.

In the late 1950s, Israel was a country of 650,000 citizens. Israel then absorbed nearly one million immigrants from Europe and Islamic countries (Central Bureau of Immigration to Israel 1948–1972, Jerusalem). Many of these immigrating children suffered from environmental deprivation. In this context, the education system highlighted the importance
of early language development as the foundation for the conceptualization skills that are critical for school learning (Michalowitz, 1999). Consequently, the system switched from a naturalistic approach to the systematic fostering of oral language through structured, small group activities. Preschool teachers were required to systematically teach oral language skills such as receptive and expressive vocabulary, pronunciations, fluency, listening and conversation skills.

In the 1970s, aiming to close achievements gaps related to socioeconomic status (SES) and cultural differences, early education policy-makers debated intensely the pros and cons of teaching reading in preschool. Results of experimental programmes indicated that teaching reading in preschool contributed to children’s reading in first grade. In spite of this, policy-makers decided not to implement this approach. They concluded that oral language is the most important literacy component and that teaching reading will put an unnecessary stress on preschoolers at the expense of other age-appropriate activities (e.g. free play, creativity) (Yanay, 1992).

In the 1990s, the Israeli education system adopted the ‘whole-language’ approach to early literacy and reading acquisition (Brosh-Vaitz, 2006). The claim that literacy is acquired ‘naturally’ shifted the focus from structured, language-promoting activities to creating a literacy-rich environment providing opportunities to practise interrelated language skills (speaking, comprehending, reading and writing) (Ministry of Education (MoE), 1995). Preschool teachers were instructed to avoid dealing intentionally with ‘alphabetical skills’ (e.g. letter knowledge, letter–sound correspondence) and to focus on providing children with opportunities to participate in authentic literacy activities.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ‘Reading Committee’ released worrisome official data regarding the poor reading achievement in Israel (Shapira, 2001). This committee stressed that the early education system is responsible for initiating the process of literacy acquisition by intentionally promoting early literacy skills. Following these recommendations, the Ministry of Education (MoE) established a committee of experts whose aim was to offer practical ways to promote early literacy as a foundation for learning to read and write (Levin, 2001). The committee stated that nurturing early literacy has to become an essential component of the early education curriculum and determined the competencies that should be achieved prior to entering school. Based on these recommendations, the MoE established a curriculum committee which developed the current national early literacy curriculum for Hebrew speaking children (MoE, 2006) and Arabic speaking children (MoE, 2008). This curriculum defines the required goals, expected competencies and teaching methods. It refers in a balanced manner to five major early literacy domains: alphabetic skills, emergent writing and reading, oral language, communication skills and book immersion.

The publication of the curriculum raised a concern among some professionals, who argued that teaching alphabetic skills and early reading and writing in preschool is useless and ‘robs children of their childhood’. Others thought that promoting letter knowledge in the early education system is developmentally too early and expressed their concern regarding the tendency to focus on measurable alphabetic skills at the expense of wider linguistic enrichment (e.g. Shimron, 2006).

Keeping in mind that for many years preschool teachers’ perceptions were shaped by the prevailing approach that early literacy has to be acquired mainly through everyday activities, the curriculum requirements constituted a major change. To ensure proper implementation of the reform, the MoE invested significant resources in the training of professional staff (educational counsellors, pedagogical supervisors and teachers). Training programmes were developed and carried out in close collaboration with academic experts. In a study that took
place in 2010–2011, nearly all of a quasi-random sample of preschool teachers (119 out of 120) reported that they had attended in-service training in literacy, with most of them (106 out of 120) reporting learning about the programme across more than 56 hours. Most of the teachers obtained ongoing professional guidance from counsellors who specialized in the field of early literacy (Sverdlov et al., 2014).

The National Literacy Curriculum: foundations for reading and writing

Goals

According to the curriculum, the main expected early literacy competencies for children prior to entering school are as follows:

1. **Alphabetic knowledge and early reading and writing** – familiarity with the alphabet, phonological awareness, understanding the alphabetic principle (letter–sound correspondence), understanding the functions of written texts, being motivated to engage in reading and writing activities;
2. **Linguistic efficiency** – possessing a rich vocabulary, using morphologically sophisticated and syntactically correct spoken language at an age-appropriate level, using efficient listening and oral skills to manage conversations;
3. **Book immersion** – being acquainted with literature and motivated to listen to books, familiarity with the books’ vocabulary and expressions, and understanding of concepts of print.

Setting national goals was intended to develop indicators and to create a unified commitment to promote children’s literacy upon their first steps into the early education system. Children’s early entrance into the education system – and the systematic early literacy intervention accompanying the three years of preschool – helps to promote children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and give all children a solid starting point in terms of literacy, prior to their initiation into grade school.

The expected competencies in each domain were broken down into three separate age groups – three to four years old; four to five years old; five to six years old – that would take into account developmental differences. The following are examples of the expected competencies for each age groups in three sub-domains:

**Phonological awareness**: three to four years old: identifies rhymes and enjoys rhyming, produces rhymes, identifies repetitive patterns in children’s stories, recites short songs and rhymes; four to five years old: produces rhymes with meaningful words, breaks words into syllables, merges syllables into words, identifies, isolates and compares syllables; five to six years old: breaks words into sub-syllables units (CV) and phonemes, merges sub-syllables and syllables into words, compares sub-syllables and syllables.

**Emergent writing**: three to four years old: uses pseudo letters; four to five years old: uses random letters, writes his/her own name, integrates writing into play and everyday activities; five to six years old: includes some grapho-phonemic representations in writing.

**Book immersion**: three to four years old: shows an interest in books and a willingness to participate in shared reading, recognizes few books by name/cover, recognizes phrases from familiar books and recites them, chooses books based on his/her preferences; four to
five years old: recognizes a variety of books by name, initiates re-reading of books, relates to books by various criteria such as themes or genres; five to six years old: chooses books based on his/her preference of authors, specific subjects or genres, uses books as a source of information on a variety of issues.

Didactic guidelines

Alongside the detailed sub-goals in each domain, the curriculum provides teachers with didactic guidelines detailing how to integrate literacy in everyday activities while keeping the ‘preschool spirit’. In addition to these general guidelines, the curriculum offers proposals for specific activities to promote each sub-goal by age-group. For example, in the early writing domain, for the three- to four-year-old children, the curriculum suggests writing the child’s name on his/her art projects and talking about the characteristics of written language when sharing books with the children. For the four- to five-year-old children, teachers are guided to encourage children to use writing in their play and to write their names, support children’s writing on the computer, initiate creative activities that include writing (e.g. spelling words using letters cut from newspapers) and initiate functional writing activities (e.g. birthday greetings, writing lists, recipes). When children are at their last year in the early education system (five to six years old) the curriculum guides the teacher to encourage children to write frequently and to support their understanding of letter–sound correspondences during writing.

Assessment

The curriculum emphasizes teachers’ autonomy in selecting the instruction methods and the specific goals that they want to emphasize in their classes, based on ongoing assessment of children’s needs. According to the Curriculum and the Preschool Education Practice Guidelines (2010) the assessment should be based on information gathered during routine preschool activities through observations. In their assessment of children’s literacy, teachers have to refer to the expected competencies defined in the National Curriculum. For each competency according to the age group, the curriculum describes specific behaviours indicating that goals have been reached. For example, in the writing domain, when a three-year-old child points to a written text and asks ‘What does this say’, it is an indication that he/she achieved the age-appropriate expected competency. The curriculum also offers tools for ongoing documentation of children’s performance.

The curriculum implementation: an assessment study

Sverdlov et al. (2014) studied the implementation of the early literacy curriculum six years after its introduction. Teachers (N = 120) responded to questionnaires and twelve teachers also participated in an interview. Teachers reported that they are intensively promoting all areas of literacy. The most frequently reported activity that takes place in preschools on a daily basis is ‘reading books to children’. Teachers reported that following the new curriculum, there has been an increase in literacy activities across all the domains. The biggest change relates to activities relating to advancing children’s alphabet skills. Interestingly, when asked about their preferences, teachers regard the advancement of oral language, communication skills and book immersion as more important than the advancement of alphabet skills and emergent writing and reading.
Current practices

Today, great attention is given to designing a literacy-rich environment that encourages literacy activities and facilitates independent learning. Preschools are filled with print, books, literacy games, letters and writing materials. This rich environment ‘invites’ children to engage in literacy activities, both individually and in groups, during most of the school day. Each preschool has a library containing books from various genres (usually more than 150 books). Further, the reading area in each preschool is equipped with furniture that allows children to read and to enjoy follow-up reading activities (e.g. retell or dramatize a story) comfortably.

Fostering literacy is integrated in everyday activities. Teachers relate to literacy in all the preschool’s themes (e.g. holidays, seasons, weather) throughout the year, and through the research projects that they run. Additionally, they work daily with small groups (four to six children) in accordance with a defined plan based on teachers’ assessments of children’s differing needs (MoE, 2010). Some of these activities are aimed at directly promoting literacy skills, (e.g. telling a story while following pictures and writing it down), while others promote literacy indirectly, while addressing other issues, (e.g. telling and documenting the process of projects accomplished by children).

Children are encouraged to borrow books from the preschool library weekly to read at home. Technology and interactive media are integrated into most of the early education classrooms, with the degree of implementation depending upon the teacher’s beliefs and technological skills. Typically, there is at least one computer and printer in a class. With the guidance of adults, children are encouraged to use office tools such as Paint, Word and PowerPoint. They are also engaged, either individually or with friends, with interactive computer games focusing on literacy and mathematics skills. In the last ten years, the use of the internet has become more common in the preschools, mainly for gathering information and for creating communication networks of the children and their families. The use of electronic books is rare in Israeli preschools, even though studies performed in Israel revealed that reading e-books to young children promotes their literacy development (Korat et al., 2014; Korat and Shamir, 2012).

Encouraging shared book-reading

Acknowledging the importance of shared book reading, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in collaboration with co-founding partners invested in programmes for encouraging reading. The main programme is the PJ Library, initiated by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Founded in 2009, the programme offers young children and their families an opportunity to create a tradition of reading stories together at home. The preschools receive one book monthly for each child and a copy for the class library. The teachers introduce the book, engaging children in fun and educational activities surrounding the books’ stories. Then, children receive a copy for their home libraries. Books for the programme are selected by a pedagogical committee, with reference to the children’s ages. In addition to their high literary quality, the books are chosen to invite discussion on universal values or ideas and their reflection in the Jewish heritage. Overall, during their three years in the early education system, children are given a gift of 24 books (eight books each school year). This programme benefits 96 per cent of the children in the public Hebrew-speaking preschools, including special education classes.

Matkabat al-Fanoos (Lantary Library) is the PJ Library’s ‘sister programme’, operating in accordance with similar principles in Arabic-speaking preschools (supported also by the Price
Family Charitable Fund). The programme has been in place since 2014, and benefits nearly 100 per cent of children in public Arab preschools. In both programmes (PJ Library and Matkabat al-Fanoos), the last pages of each book include suggestions to parents for joint activities and discussions. Moreover, in the Arab families it encourages practice of Standard Arabic.

Over 900 (11 per cent) preschools in Israel take part in a ‘Book Parade’ programme initiated by the MoE to encourage shared book reading. Preschools that join the programme receive books for their library selected by a committee of professionals (15 books for five- to six-year-olds and ten books for four- to five-year-olds). The teachers are encouraged to integrate repeated reading of these books in their classes followed by related activities. At the end of the school year, children are invited to vote for their favourite book among the books being offered.

**Early literacy responses to particular needs**

**Ultra-orthodox children**

About 25 per cent of the Jewish children in Israel come from ultra-Orthodox families and attend independent educational institutions that are not fully committed to the state curriculum. The methods used in the ultra-Orthodox preschools for boys (girls do not study in these classes) differ from the centralized policy. In these preschools, emphasis is placed on religious study, with children as young as three years old learning to read using the traditional ‘Cheder’ code-based method. The method is based on rote learning of letters and their combination with diacritics (e.g. the letter BEIT /b/ in combination with the diacritic for /aa/ – /ba/, then in combination with the diacritic /ee/ – /be/, etc.) and then teaching the reading of words and sentences phonetically by repetition. The unique importance of early reading in the ultra-Orthodox community derives from the lengthy Jewish tradition according to which one learns to read in order to study the Old Testament from a very young age (Brosh-Vaitz, 2006). Girls study in separate preschools that generally follow the MoE curriculum.

**Children with special needs**

Special education programmes are provided for children with special needs from three years of age. The special education preschool teachers are committed to the general literacy curriculum, ensuring children’s progress by providing specific support according to the children’s needs. Teachers are obligated to assess children’s general development. For this assessment they use a systematic observation tool called ‘Mabatim’, developed by the Department for Preschool Education in the Ministry of Education. Using this tool, teachers describe the children’s functioning in all areas of development, including language and literacy. Based on teachers’ assessments, children who experience difficulties are diagnosed by the school psychologist and, in coordination with parents, are presented to a local professional placement committee. The committee then decides upon the child’s eligibility for special education services.

Most of the children in the early education system who have been assigned to special education services are integrated in preschools (full or part time) with appropriate assistance on the basis of need and availability (e.g. part-time special education personal preschool teachers, language clinicians). Additionally, there are special education preschools, where small groups of children who are lacking in language, communication or speech skills are taught by
special education preschool teachers and get support from multi-professional staff, such as language clinicians, occupational therapists or physical therapists, according to their needs.

Children from multilingual families

Israel is a country with a population of about eight million. From 1948 until today, more than three million people have immigrated to Israel. As of 2015, approximately 10 per cent of Israeli children are from families who have immigrated to Israel in the last decade (mainly from the former Soviet Union countries, France and Ethiopia). To date, however, there have been no specific literacy curricula or guidelines for the early education system (unlike the primary schools) regarding the children for whom Hebrew is their second language.

From the establishment of Israel, immigrants were encouraged to speak only Hebrew with their children. Since the early 1990s, Israeli language policy has changed and immigrants are encouraged to maintain their original language and culture.

One of the high points of immigration to Israel was between 1990 and 2001 when about 1,000,000 immigrants arrived, most of them from the former Soviet Union. Many of them retain their language from the country of origin as the primary language at home and are interested in maintaining the heritage language in the generation born in Israel. In response to this need, an organization of Russian-speaking immigrant teachers and private entrepreneurs are offering programmes, such as bilingual preschools, outside the official state institutions.

Challenges to be addressed in the coming years

In this chapter we have discussed early literacy within the early education system in Israel, highlighting the features of the Hebrew language and the Israeli society. We have reviewed the changes that occurred in early literacy policy in Israel and focused on current practices. The first findings regarding the outcomes of the new curriculum are encouraging. Recently, the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education at the Ministry of Education (RAMA) assessed the alphabet and phonological skills of a representative sample of more than 500 children upon entering the first grade. The results showed that 80 per cent of the children correctly named 18–22 letters (out of 22), 96 per cent identified initial syllables and 91 per cent identified the initial phoneme.

Still, we see important challenges to be addressed in the coming years.

Promoting emergent writing

Studies have pointed to the benefit of writing activities on young children’s literacy achievements in preschool and to children’s reading achievements in first grade (Levin and Aram, 2013; Ouellette and Sénéchal, 2008). Research in Israel showed that parents’ supporting early writing, communicating the steps in the word encoding process and encouraging their children to carry out these steps relates to children’s early literacy (Aram and Levin, 2001, 2011) and predicts children’s reading and writing achievements in second grade beyond the child’s early literacy and the family’s SES (Aram and Levin, 2004). However, research on preschool teachers’ beliefs on the importance of literacy goals revealed that promoting emergent writing is perceived to be the least important literacy goal: less than promoting oral language, communication skills, book immersion or alphabetic skills. Further, the average frequency of activities promoting emergent writing-reading consistently appeared to be lowest (Sverdlov et al., 2014). Teachers and even their mentors and supervisors may not yet be sufficiently
familiar with the evidence-based conclusions regarding the benefit of invented spelling activities on children’s literacy achievements. A collaboration between researchers and early-education professionals is needed to raise the awareness of preschool teachers as to the importance of promoting emergent writing and developing methods to practise writing in preschools while keeping the ‘preschool spirit’.

**The use of digital, interactive media**

There is a growing understanding that technology and interactive media are tools that can promote effective learning when they are used intentionally by early childhood educators. The use of digital media supports various learning goals, such as literacy goals, and at the same time helps to build digital literacy skills, such as using technology to access information, to communicate with others, for independent learning (NAEYC and the Fred Rogers Center, 2012)

In Israeli preschools, the use of digital media is very limited. For instance, reading books is reported as the most frequent activity in the preschool, but the use of electronic books (e-books) is rare. In light of research that indicates that children benefit from activities with e-books to the same extent that they benefit from reading printed books, it is important to raise teachers’ awareness of their existence and help them learn how to select and use them (Korat et al., 2014; Korat and Shamir, 2012).

The integration of digital technologies can be expected to take time due to objective constraints including limited software, few high-quality, Hebrew e-books, high cost of digital devices and low level of teachers’ digital literacy. Given the increasing reliance on technology and interactive media, however, it is important to find ways to incorporate them into early literacy instruction.

**Coordinating expectations between parents and teachers**

It is important to acknowledge the need for close relationships between parents and preschool teachers (Powell et al., 2012). Research has found incongruences between teachers’ own beliefs and their perceptions of parents’ beliefs regarding early literacy goals (Sverdlov et al., 2014). Teachers expressed the belief that oral language and communication skills are considerably more important than alphabetic skills or emergent writing–reading. At the same time, they think that parents consider the promotion of alphabetic skills and emergent writing–reading as the most important goals. According to teachers, parents are driven by the ambition to procure the best academic ‘starting point’ for their children as they enter school and they assume that knowing how to read upon entering first grade will guarantee their children’s success. In contrast, preschool teachers think that communication and social skills are the key factors for later success. This perceived incongruence between teachers’ beliefs and their perceptions about parents’ beliefs has to be acknowledged and discussed. It is important to open a dialogue between teachers and parents regarding early literacy development and promotion in the preschool and at home.

In conclusion, the early literacy policy in Israel is based on major findings from international research and on local studies that focus on Hebrew characteristics and the specific ways to promote them. Beyond the language specifics, the early literacy policy and practices are influenced by the challenges of the political situation, the diverse population and the education system. Israeli researchers continue to work with their colleagues around the world hoping to contribute new knowledge to improve the future of early literacy education.
Early literacy policy and practice in Israel

Note

1 Preschools in this chapter refer to educational institutes for children aged three to six.

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