

HEBREW IMMERSION AT CAMP RAMAH IN NEW ENGLAND

The JTS Early Childhood Hebrew Language Immersion Initiative

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An experiment in Hebrew language immersion at Camp Ramah in New England this past summer demonstrated a new direction for Hebrew language instruction in the Early Childhood years. Stemming from a strong belief that Hebrew language is integral to Jewish education and Jewish identity development, the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education and the Gross Hebrew Language Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) are actively designing new approaches to revitalize the teaching of Hebrew in North America.

As demonstrated by research, preschool is the ideal setting for teaching Hebrew language as a viable, vivid and communicative tool. Hebrew language immersion programs at the preschool level should give children a solid oral Hebrew language base and a level of fluency on which to build once they enter day or synagogue school programs. In addition, we assume that parents who witness their children's gains will be motivated to enroll their children for more hours per week in Jewish schooling beyond the preschool years, rather than fewer as is the current trend. Similarly, day schools will be able to build upon these early language acquisitions and move students further in their Hebraic and Judaic achievements and self-esteem.

Hebrew language has always been a strong component of the educational program at Camp Ramah in New England. This past summer the youngest members of the Camp Ramah community set the standard, through their participation in a pilot immersion project sponsored by the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education and the Gross Hebrew Language Institute, with the full support of Rabbi Debra Cantor, Director of Camp Ramah in New England. The goal of this summer program was to plan, train for, implement and evaluate a limited experimental pro-

gram based on experiences in teaching foreign languages in a preschool setting, similar to the Montessori model. The findings of this short-term two-month pilot project will be used in the long-range development and implementation of a wide-scale Hebrew language immersion program in Jewish preschools throughout the United States.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Gan preschool program at Camp Ramah was selected as the pilot site, despite its short-term nature and small student body of 8-12 students. The students were children of staff members, who may not be representative of the general Jewish population of parents who choose a Jewish nursery school for their children. It was also missing the continuity component within a framework of future language instruction

once the summer was over and the children returned to their homes. However, the intensity of the program, the prevalent Jewish/Israeli atmosphere at camp, and the exposure to Hebrew throughout the day and throughout the camp grounds were factors which do not exist in a synagogue preschool setting. In our view, these positive factors outweighed the negative in our decision to use a transient community as our pilot site.

Several key people participated in the planning and implementation of the pilot project. Two Early Childhood educators fluent in Hebrew were hired by the camp director. Donna Ernest, a North American, acquired her Hebrew in day school (K-12) and studied at Bar-Ilan University for two years. Berta Alan, originally from Brazil, lived in Israel for five years and has taught Hebrew in the United States for many years. Both teachers were enthusiastic about their pioneering role in this Hebrew immersion initiative.

Playing "mis'ada" (restaurant) in the barn gave the children a chance to use their dinnertable vocabulary.



Photo courtesy of Melton Research Center for Jewish Education

Staff from the Jewish Theological Seminary included:

Frieda Robins, Early Childhood Project Director at the Melton Research Center. She has recently conducted broad research on foreign language acquisition in Early Childhood.¹ She had directed the Early Childhood programs at Camp Ramah for eight years.

Dr. Adina Ofek, Associate Professor of Jewish Education at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, directs the Gross Hebrew Language Institute; and

Lisa Grant, Melton Research Center's Research and Pilot Project Manager.

Dr. Steven M. Brown, Director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, provided overall supervision of the project.

Program planning for the pilot project took place from mid-April to mid-June and involved both the Gan teachers and staff from JTS. Final program preparations occurred during staff week at Camp Ramah, June 18- 22. At that point, the curriculum and schedule were finalized, and the Gan was set up with relevant materials, games, visual and audio aids, Hebrew signs, Israeli posters, and Hebrew books to create a total Hebrew language environment.

The Gan opened for staff children on June 24, 1998. Melton staff were present during these first few days for meetings, consulting and advocating for the program to the parents. By the time the camp was underway, there were 11 children in the Gan, ranging in age from just three to almost six and including one bilingual Israeli-American, one Hebrew speaking-only Israeli and nine other English-only speakers. Two of the Anglophones had a limited Hebrew knowledge of about 40 basic words (mostly nouns); the rest did not know any Hebrew. Five children who started in the first session continued throughout the summer. Three additional children, ranging in age from two and a half to five years, joined the Gan in the second four-week session.

PILOT PROJECT EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

A variety of evaluation methodologies were employed during program planning and implementation. The evaluator was a member of the planning team that developed the course of study and outlined the implementation steps necessary prior to opening day. Over the course of the summer, Melton staff came to the preschool

on a regular basis to observe daily operations. Both the program evaluator and project director served as observers at different times during the summer. In addition, project staff consulted with the teachers during these site visit days to help them brainstorm strategies for tackling the daily challenges of working with a mixed age group in an unfamiliar camp setting.

Formal program assessment was based on several sources of data:

1. Written transcripts of participant observations: A total of nine observations took place over the 8.5 weeks of the program. Each observation lasted a minimum of three hours and included watching the children both with their primary teachers, as well as in a range of camp activities, such as

The project director said to three-year-old Perla's father, "He m'vina et ha'kol b'Ivrit," ("She understands everything in Hebrew"), to which she responded by turning around, posing defiantly with her hands on her hips, and saying: "No, I don't!"

swimming, nature, singing and dance. In addition, Dr. Ofek interviewed the teachers toward the end of the summer.

2. Both teachers contributed to two journals. In one the teachers recorded their perceptions of each individual child's progress. The second log focused on their overall perceptions of the challenges and accomplishments of the pilot. In addition, each teacher wrote a summary reflection of the experience at the end of the summer.

3. Informal parent interviews were conducted by the project director during the second session.

4. Videotapes of three sessions were reviewed by the faculty advisor and project director.

RESULTS

Each child in the program taught us valuable lessons about language acquisition through an immersion program. As a rule, the impact of Hebrew immersion was to intensify already existing personality traits and behaviors. For instance, shy children

became shyer. Sociable children became more sociable, enjoying the challenge of learning a new form of expression. Non-cooperative children became even less cooperative, using the language barrier as a way of avoiding compliance. Nonetheless, regardless of personal characteristics, all of the children grew rapidly and significantly in their comprehension over the course of time in the Gan. A few anecdotes help to illustrate.²

Michael was a lively boy who had just turned six. As reported by his parents, he knew random Hebrew words and phrases. Initially, he was apprehensive and resentful about teachers only speaking Hebrew. Within the first few days of the program, he responded to simple questions accompanied by visual cues, such as "What's this?" "Who is that?" "Where is your backpack?" He also quickly was able to identify objects and activities germane to the routine. During the informal play time on the sixth day in the Gan, he was teaching a list of Hebrew words to one of the babysitters who knew no Hebrew, including: tree, sun, clouds, table, yes, no. At clean-up time, he announced without prompting, "*Hashulhan hazeh m'lukhlakh!*" ("This table is dirty.") By the end of the second week of the program, when motivated and focused, Michael absorbed virtually all of the vocabulary introduced around the weekly themes, understood instructions for the day and regularly inserted Hebrew words in his speech.

Barry was a calm and cooperative four-year-old boy. He joined the program in the second session. He followed directions given in Hebrew from his first day. He repeated colors, absorbed word meanings and participated in all the activities, visibly understanding the teachers. His mother reported that he said words in Hebrew in his sleep, and started calling her *ema*, which pleased her.

One of the youngest children was the lovely, yet stubborn three-year-old Perla. When she wanted something, she was able to say it in Hebrew. Perla played happily when she got exactly what she wanted and was not disturbed. She screamed and yelled when she was upset no matter what language was spoken to her. By mid-summer she used Hebrew to say most of the colors, was able to repeat short sentences and produce classroom words such as the table, milk, juice, etc. On the last Friday night of camp, while the campers were noisily singing in the dining hall, the project director said to her father, "*He m'vina et ha'kol b'Ivrit,*" ("She understands everything in

Hebrew”), to which she responded by turning around, posing defiantly with her hands on her hips, and saying: “No, I don’t!”

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

The purpose of this pilot project was to learn what challenges and obstacles might impede actual implementation of a Hebrew language immersion program in a preschool. Many of the challenges that arose during this pilot project were specific to a summer camp setting. Nevertheless, they taught us important lessons with regard to creating a vision for a school, and in terms of staff and program planning. A description of these constraints and what we learned from them follows.

1. Developmental Range of the Children

The Gan at Camp Ramah in New England is a service provided to camp staff with young children. Initially, we understood that the program would serve children ages three to five. However, the actual mix of children represented a much wider age range than we had anticipated. The youngest child in the Gan was under three; in the first month, two children had just turned six. There was also a toddler (two years old) who joined the Gan unofficially. This huge developmental range presented the teachers with numerous challenges in the areas of classroom activities and management.

Another related obstacle was that several children came to the Gan for two weeks or less, because of their parents’ positions at camp. These short-stay children often had difficulty becoming socially integrated

into the group. Much of this was driven by personality and developmental level.

The teachers’ journal indicates that after the first few days, most of the children understood Hebrew most of the time, followed directions, were engaged in the various activities even when they did not understand every word. They especially enjoyed hands-on projects, Israeli videos and dramatization. As a general rule, the younger children with less developed language skills were more intuitive learners in terms of understanding questions and instructions in Hebrew. These children relied more on visual cues, voice inflection and pantomime to guide them. Many of the older, more verbal children stubbornly resisted visual cues such as sign language. They demanded to know what was being said in English. For example, during one of the early days of the pilot, a teacher told 4.5-year-old Yuri to put on his shoes. While she spoke the words, she also pantomimed the action. He repeatedly asked: “What?” This exchange went on at least three times, at which point the teacher gave up in frustration and said in English: “Put on your shoes.” In contrast, three-year old Ruth started in the Gan a few days later than the other children. Despite her late entry, she almost immediately understood and complied with the routine, following the other children as well as responding to direct instructions, such as: “Go get your backpack and stand in line.”

2. Support Staff

In addition to the two full-time teachers, the Gan had a teacher aide on staff who was a 17-year-old native Israeli raised in a bilingual English/Hebrew household. From

the first day on, however, she demonstrated great reluctance to speak Hebrew with the children, claiming they were uncomfortable and anxious when they didn’t understand what was being said. Despite repeated explanations and requests from the teachers, she refused to speak Hebrew. As a result, children would often go to her for comfort and explanation when they were confused by the teachers. Obviously, this created an uncomfortable dynamic between the staff. In addition to this non-compliant aide, there were three teen-age babysitters who came into the preschool at various points in the day. None of these girls had any Hebrew language skills. Again, their presence diluted the immersion experience. In a regular preschool, such staffing challenges could be avoided.

3. Camp Schedule

The atmosphere in the Gan was influenced by its summer camp setting. The program was designed to take advantage of many of the activities offered to the campers themselves, such as instructional swim, Israeli singing and dancing, sport, nature and art. Most of these special activities were offered daily. In previous years the specialists worked with the children in the Gan bunk or next to it. This summer, these activities entailed walking the children to different sites in the camp, which was time-consuming and often difficult in terms of transition management. In addition, in the initial planning, we understood that all of the program staff, with the exception of swimming teachers, would speak Hebrew with the children. This did not materialize. Thus, what was intended as a total immersion program became a semi-immersion program. A maximum of 2.5-3 hours each day was conducted in Hebrew. As noted above, even during this limited time frame, the support staff in the Gan spoke English. Most of these problems could be controlled in a more standard single-site preschool setting through hiring, training, supervision as well as programming.

4. Other Constraints

The pilot project revealed several challenges that were not directly related to the summer camp location. The first concerns the Hebrew language capabilities of the primary teachers. Neither teacher was a native Hebrew speaker. While hiring native-speaking teachers is desirable but not essential to the success of an immersion program, it is essential that all staff who interact directly with the children have near-native language skills, a rich vocabulary and correct usage of Hebrew.

Playing “Mini-malachim”: One challenge was to get the activities counselors to speak Hebrew with the children.



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