

PEDAGOGIC GAME-CHANGER

The Israel Center for Educational Innovation (ICEI) is proving that high poverty doesn't have to mean low achievement levels, boosting outcomes for Ethiopian-Israeli students and their classmates alike ■ Eti Bukshpan



Above: Choosing a new book from an in-classroom leveled library.

Facing page: A class gathered close around a teacher for a reading mini-lesson.

Below: Writing a note to remember a reading insight.

National data show that the Israeli education system has not yet managed to reverse an extremely troubling equation: low socio-economic status of students is a reliable predictor of low academic achievement and limited professional opportunity later on in life, and high socio-economic status translates to high academic achievement and greater opportunity in life. These facts could easily lead one to the conclusion that the fate of Ethiopian Israeli children – nearly half of whom live in poverty – is sealed before they even set foot in an Israeli classroom.

When the Israel Center for Education Innovation launched a whole-school reform project seven years ago and took on the visionary task of reversing these negative trends, the program educators developed a revolutionary approach to classroom pedagogy, school culture and community engagement. In recognition of the fact that fostering literacy is the primary mission of elementary school, that literacy lies at the core of all learning, and that literacy was a particular weakness of the Ethiopian immigrant community, ICEI chose to invest significant resources in promoting a holistic program in elementary schools with high concentrations of Ethiopian students that embraces literacy at both the classroom and community level while building a school culture of academic excellence.

Exciting initiative

I joined the professional staff of the Israel Center for Educational Innovation earlier this year, after a 41-year career at the Ministry of Education. During my last eight years at the Ministry, I served as the lead professional overseeing the country's Hebrew language instruction in more than 1,400 elementary schools. I also became

familiar with ICEI's program and the extraordinary way in which it was beginning to turn around failing schools with large concentrations of Ethiopian students. I was intrigued, and I wanted to be part of this innovative initiative and the exciting potential it represented. Our goal is to break down the correlation between low socio-economic status and low achievement, and to advance Ethiopian-Israeli students along with their classmates. ICEI's results so far are quite impressive.

As ICEI's new Pedagogic Director, I quickly realized from the inside that this program is a potential game-changer on the Israeli educational landscape. A unique pedagogic approach combined with a holistic appreciation of the school community and a substantial investment of resources have come together to result in impressive outcomes. I believe ICEI can help level the playing field and provide more equal opportunity for academic success for dozens of additional schools and thousands of additional students in the Israeli school system.

The cornerstone of the enterprise was to adapt the highly successful balanced literacy instruction model developed at the Reading and Writing Project of Columbia University's Teachers College, under the leadership of Prof. Lucy Calkins. The idea was to promote literacy through a model that enables teachers to individualize or differentiate their teaching, and to focus children on the importance and joys of reading and writing as an integral part of their lives.

Promoting literacy

The ICEI program, now in 23 schools across 12 municipalities, provides extra morning class-time hours for reading, writing and discussion. Each classroom in the program has a library of up to 1,000 books sectioned by reading level, making books more accessible and enjoyable for students at every level. Teachers receive intensive training in the ICEI pedagogy, and are supported in their schools by full-time Literacy Coaches who act as co-teachers and also provide demonstration lessons. Parents from the Ethiopian-Israeli community meet individually and in groups with the schools' Ethiopian-Israeli Community Liaisons who help them understand how to best support their children's academic efforts at home.

Principals receive mentoring from seasoned colleagues – retired principals – trained in creating a culture of excellence and academic achievement. ICEI trains teachers to manage their classrooms so that every child's learning needs can be addressed effectively, in groups and individually, with a minimum of disciplinary issues and an optimal atmosphere of mutual respect.



The program sends a strong message that literacy and high academic achievement can and should be expected from every student through equal access to books and to educational opportunity. From the sheer number of books in each classroom to the furniture and cheerful wall posters that boost students' capabilities in independent learning, the affirmational atmosphere of a classroom helps maximize the students' focus on reading and writing. The program also fosters special initiatives to reinforce our literacy focus, such as the National Young Writers' Competition which this past year had nearly 1,000 volunteer entries.

Far-reaching impact

ICEI, a nonprofit whose programs are funded in a partnership of the Ministry of Education, the municipalities, and private funders in the US and Israel, is demonstrating outcomes that no other group has been able to achieve to date – a notable improvement in academic scores for Ethiopian-Israeli and other at-risk students that is quickly shrinking the gap that usually seems predetermined by socio-economic factors.

The program includes all children in the schools – not only Ethiopian-Israelis – and assesses each student's independent reading level. By constantly tracking individual student progress, teachers ensure that each student is advancing. Project outcomes based on extensive program evaluation data across the 2014-15 school year clearly demonstrate at-risk students learning in ICEI project classrooms are making meaningful gains in academic achievement across each academic year and they are maintaining those gains across multiple years as the project is sustained in schools over time.

Interestingly, ICEI is also finding that among the el-

ementary school students who are assessed at the highest reading levels – equivalent to middle school levels – there is a disproportionately large number of Ethiopian-Israeli fifth and sixth grade students, demonstrating the potential of Ethiopian students to reach the highest levels of achievement. In the program's two most veteran municipalities, Netanya and Petach Tikvah, graduating sixth graders, including significant numbers of Ethiopian students, are increasingly accepted into the most prestigious and selective middle schools in their cities. Educators in these schools recognize this as a direct outcome of the ICEI program.

ICEI continues to strengthen its partnership with Israel's Ministry of Education and participating municipalities, build up its coalition of American and other funders to meet a growing demand, and create alliances with organizations such as the Center for Educational Technology, in order to continue to innovate and craft effective, evidence-based lesson plans. For years, Ethiopian-Israeli students garnered among the lowest achievement levels of any sub-group within Israel's Jewish student population. ICEI's expansive effort, while requiring significant resources, has begun to change that reality. The implications and potential to impact both more Ethiopian-Israeli students and other low-income students are vast.

Eti Bukshpan is the Pedagogic Director of the Israel Center for Educational Innovation (ICEI), and the former Director of the Department of Foundational Skills Instruction for Elementary Education for the State of Israel, the Ministry of Education's senior language instruction professional for elementary education.



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For more information about ICEI, please contact Don Futterman, Executive Director: dfutterman@icei.co.il, Tel. 09-7421311, www.icei.co.il.