



Grazia Fridman teaches first graders to read at the Shorashim school in south Tel Aviv

Photos: Ilan Spira

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Thanks to an innovative pedagogic approach, the Israel Center for Educational Innovation (ICEI) is greatly improving literacy among young school children in disadvantaged areas - giving them the necessary skills to compete with their peers

| Wendy Elliman

Animated and warm, her voice loud and her every word clear, Grazia Fridman is the kind of first-grade teacher you find in classrooms all over Israel, except - as she is the first to allow - she has completely revised her approach to teaching, thanks to the ICEI 'Springboard to Success' program in the Shorashim Elementary school in south Tel Aviv.

"I look back on my decades of teaching and wonder: How did I ever think the standard way was best?" she says. "How did I manage in the old kind of classroom? Why did I believe teaching in front of the class all morning was a good idea? Or that learning to write comes after learning to read? How did I cope without real-time feedback and without tracking each child? How did I ever see myself as a good teacher?"

At Shorashim, the children in Fridman's first-grade classes read fluently within three months - "not sounding out words, but really reading!" Fridman stresses. This is not only several months ahead of the national average (measured by the Education Ministry's ten-step assessment to determine at what point children are to be considered 'readers'), it is particularly striking because Shorashim was known until recently for low achievement.

"A quarter of our 280 first- to sixth-graders are Ethiopian-Israelis, with Hebrew often their second language," notes Shorashim principal Rabbi Ariel Bashan. "This linguistic deficit handicaps their learning. That penny dropped for me years back, when I tutored an Ethiopian-Israeli for his math *bagrut* [matriculation exam]. He was bright and mastered the material - but failed his exam because he couldn't understand what the questions were asking of him."

Nor is it only Ethiopian-Israeli pupils who have the literacy cards stacked against them. Many of their classmates at Shorashim, along with those in hundreds of additional schools throughout Israel, are from weak socio-economic backgrounds which, according to national data, "reliably predict low academic achievement and limited professional opportunity." This finding is underlined by the 2014/5 OECD Survey of Adult Skills which determined that "the association between low performance and parents' low educational attainment is particularly strong in Israel."

"Children from such backgrounds come into the educational system with poorer vocabulary and weaker conceptual knowledge" than those of stronger socio-economic status, says literacy expert Eti Bukshpan. "Too many never catch up."

Turning around failing schools

A 40-plus-year Israel Education Ministry veteran who directed national policy for Hebrew language teaching in more than 1,400 elementary schools as the Director of Foundational Skills Instruction for the Ministry of Education, Bukshpan is today ICEI's Director of Education, part of the team behind the sea-change in Fridman's first-grade teaching. "At the Ministry, I got to know the extraordinary way in which ICEI's 'It's Elementary' Whole School Improvement program was turning around failing schools," she says. "As a passionate believer in equalizing educational opportunity, I wanted to be part of it. Now we are developing our model with first and second graders as a stand-alone program called 'Springboard to Success,' which we hope can reach many more schools than the 24 schools in which 'It's Elementary!' currently operates."

ICEI is relatively new to Israel's educational landscape. It started off as a 2007 pilot in three Netanya elementary schools together with the Fidel Association, and was formally established two years later as an independent NGO. Along the way, ICEI has learned how to effectively partner with the Ministry of Education - nationally, regionally and locally



The week's King of Reading proudly (and fluently) reads to classmates



Eti Bukshpan, ICEI's Director of Education



Don Futterman, ICEI's Executive Director

"OUR BREAKTHROUGHS IN LITERACY CAN BE USED IN EVERY SCHOOL IN ISRAEL TO GET CHILDREN QUICKLY AND EFFICIENTLY UP TO SPEED. IN FIRST AND SECOND GRADES, CHILDREN LEARN TO READ. AFTER THAT, THEY READ TO LEARN"

– and with participating municipalities to ensure sustainable and long-term impact in the schools of the ICEI network.

"ICEI operates the most comprehensive elementary school improvement program in the country," asserts Don Futterman, its executive director. "Improving literacy instruction – the central mission of elementary school and the basis of all future learning – is the anchor of our program, but we dramatically impact teaching in all subject areas. Together with the school faculty, we are able to produce articulate, capable readers and writers, who constantly refine their higher order thinking throughout elementary school."

"In the first two grades, in what we call 'Springboard to Success,' children learn reading, writing, speaking and listening skills they need to be able to 'read and write to learn.' As they continue on to grades 3-6, facing more challenging texts and assignments, they continue to develop these skills in increasingly sophisticated ways, so they are ready to face middle school in seventh grade. The fate of children from low-income homes need not be sealed before they set foot in the classroom," Futterman insists.

Run in cooperation with Israel's Education Ministry and local education departments, with an array of funders, the program is adapted from the Balanced Literacy model of instruction developed by Columbia University's Teachers College Reading & Writing Project founded and directed by Prof. Lucy Calkins. In Israel, 'It's Elementary' now reaches close to 7,000 disadvantaged elementary school pupils in 24 elementary schools in 13 municipalities. Many more schools are anxious to join.

Living labs

ICEI classrooms are "living labs," says Shorashim's principal, Rabbi Bashan. First-graders settle around their teachers on carpets or benches for stories and discussion. Charts list words which youngsters define. The week's King or Queen of Reading, crowned and robed, proudly (and fluently) reads to classmates. The 600 to 1,000 books in each classroom library are grouped at ten levels, from those with a word or two per page and lots of pictures, upward. There are 10 to 15 hours of literacy teaching each week, compared with the four to eight in most Israeli schools, and a half-hour's independent reading every day, along with daily mini-lessons for writing and creative writing time.

"We give books to children who can't yet read, from their first day at school, and we start them writing that same day," says ICEI

Instructional Coach Tami Cohen. "We've found this far more effective than waiting till children learn their alphabet before teaching them to write, usually about four months into the school year. By then, our kids have the vocabulary and higher-order thinking to write whole stories!"

The class teacher is, as ever, on the front-line. "I was very uneasy about changing my teaching after so many years," says Fridman. "But Rabbi Bashan was in favor, and I took to Tami, so I tried – and saw how much better my teaching and classroom management became. My kids are more organized and independent, from keeping track of belongings to expressing their ideas. I always know exactly what I'll be doing – when I'll work with the whole class, with small groups, with individuals, and when there'll be independent reading and writing. I know where every child is struggling, and have the time and tools to help them. I'm on task in every way. And because the children are engaged and know what's expected of them, there are no discipline issues. Tami and I are a great team!"

Cohen's instructional coach position, which brings the professional development of teachers into the classroom in real time, is new in Israeli schools, adapted from a US model brought to Israel by ICEI. Employed by the Education Ministry and trained by ICEI, she has coached and co-taught with Fridman daily for the past five years. "I'm an active participant, not someone sitting on the sidelines, criticizing," she says. "I'll bring a new ICEI method or technique that we try, and then discuss what worked. Or I'll suggest a different emphasis. We plan lessons together as a collaboration between teacher and pupil, and constantly sharpen and upgrade the professional level."

Fridman, she says, "was ready to try whatever I suggested. With veteran teachers who are less receptive, I show I'm with them, not above them, that the program has endless advantages for them, and I have tools that may help them. If that doesn't work, I say: 'Let me try. Watch me.' And afterward I'll ask: 'What went well? What would you use?'"

Tracking progress

Among the tools the instructional coach brings is a user-friendly ICEI data processing website which enables teachers to track the reading, writing and overall progress of every pupil, every day. "It's an unparalleled instrument for differentiated learning, tailoring instruction to meet individual need," says Bukshpan. "It helps the teacher reach every

pupil." The data also allow ICEI to track its own progress, with figures from academic 2015/6 showing significant academic growth and success in every ICEI classroom.

Key to the program is the school principal. "When the principal leads the process of change, the atmosphere in school becomes one of high expectations and success," says Futterman. "Our mentors help principals re-focus from crisis manager mode into knowledgeable pedagogic leaders. They're in the classroom and know what's going on, sending a schoolwide message that reading and writing are a top priority, making sure students are genuinely engaged in their learning. It is the principal and the faculty who will ensure the program sustains itself once ICEI pulls back on its daily support for the school."

ICEI's multi-year investment in schools, principals and teachers moves slowly and steadily. "We've figured out a lot in how to turn around underachieving schools, how to improve teaching and strengthen school leadership. We want to bring this experience to the hundreds of low-achieving elementary schools currently outside ICEI's network," says Futterman. "We are preparing to launch 'Springboard to Success' as a cost-effective stand-alone initiative targeting first and second graders, and eventually kindergarten as well, that will potentially enable us to impact tens of thousands of disadvantaged young students."

'Springboard to Success' brings ICEI's instructional coaches, like Cohen, twice weekly to work with first- and second-grade teachers – and, in future, with kindergarten teachers, too. "The pilot showed this support can overcome learning deficits that children bring to school," says Bukshpan. "All first-graders were 'readers' by Education Ministry standards by March, six months into the school year – compared with the national expectation that most students will get there by June, and the remainder in second grade."

"With reading, writing, speaking and listening all central to the future of the individual, literacy and academic achievement can and should be expected from every pupil through equal access to books and educational opportunity, says Futterman. "Our breakthroughs in literacy and improving instruction can be used in every school in Israel to get children quickly and efficiently up to speed. In first and second grades, children should be learning to read and write. After that, they should be reading and writing to learn."

For more information about ICEI, go to www.icei.co.il