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# The Psychosocial Approach: A Case Study in School Intervention and in Teacher Training

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*Abstract: This article seeks to describe an innovative model for effective educational intervention with students in processes of risk and dropout. In the first section, Mor describes the development of this approach through ongoing dialogue with the field; in the second, Bar Shalom presents data relating to the application of this method in the framework of teacher training in the special education track at David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem. The research shows that the new tools and strategies in this approach helped the student-teachers increase their effectiveness as care givers for at-risk school students. Mor's model may be useful for care-givers in societies with large diversity and at-risk populations. It trains educators to take into account societal, familial, and cultural aspects of each child's learning style and capacity. The psychosocial approach can be seen as belonging to an emerging trend of school change in Israel in the context of at risk youth.*

Keywords: Teacher Training, At-Risk Youth, Multiculturalism, Staff Development

## Students at Risk: Definition

**N**UMEROUS FACTORS AND living circumstances may endanger the proper development of children and young people and their ability to make the most of their potential at school (Fonagy, Steele, Higgit, and Targert, 1993; Losel & Blinsener, 1990, 1994; Bender, Bliesener & Losel, 1996; Morrison & Cosden, 1997). These include personal factors, such as emotional instability, developmental problems, and difficulties in forming social relations; learning disabilities and familial aspects, such as poverty, defective parental functioning, or emotional problems faced by the parents; and environmental and social factors, such as immigration, exposure to stress and trauma, deprived neighborhoods, weakened regional education systems, the lack of social infrastructures, etc.

The external manifestations of situations of risk among students are sometimes similar (Cohen-Navot, Ellenbogen-Frankovits, and Reinfeld, 2001): protracted academic failure; late arrival and absences from school; difficulties in accepting adult authority and in forming relations with adults; behavioral problems; and lack of social integration.

## The Dimensions of the Facilitative Approach in Effective Education with Students in Processes of Risk and Dropout

Through the case study of **Ramot High School**<sup>1</sup> in a town in southern Israel, I examined the essence of educational action that creates change among students in processes of risk and enables them to develop from a situation of failure in school to productive integration in school and society.

The study<sup>2</sup> (Mor, 2003) examined the methods, attitudes, and perceptions of the teachers at Ramot School on the individual and systemic levels, discussing both those teachers who were able to lead a transition from risk to opportunity and those who proved unable to do so.

In the study I have identified three dimensions that play a crucial role in effective educational intervention with students in processes of risk, namely:

The extent to which the student is treated as a subject or an object.

The extent to which the intervention seeks (or does not seek) to create nurturing interpersonal relationships with the student and with the significant figures in the student's life.

The extent to which the pedagogy employed is consonant (or inconsonant) with the student's needs.

<sup>1</sup> This is not the school's real name.

<sup>2</sup> This study was initiated and funded by ASHALIM- Association for planning & Development of Services for Children and Youth at Risk and Their Families, Established by JDC-Israel and supported by the Government of Israel, JDC-Israel and UJA-Federation of New York.



## **Typology of the Group of Teachers Characterized by a Low Capability with Students at Risk**

### ***Dimension 1 : The Teacher Adopts an Impersonal Approach that Sees the Student as an Object for Securing Objective Demands and Standards***

The student is regarded primarily as an object that must meet requirements dictated by the outside. The attempt to fit the student into the template of external demands leads to the narrowing of the evaluation of the student's functioning to external manifestations representing these formal demands, assessed according to fixed formulas common to most educational institutions. These formulas come to be seen as objective standards determining each trimester or semester whether a student deserves positive or negative evaluation.

Risk behavior on the part of students is usually perceived as the product of objective difficulties or a rebellious nature. The teachers' remedial efforts usually focus on an effort to "correct the problem." The common manifestations of this approach as found in the study were:

Demand for uniform functioning from all the students, supported by a neutral and professional stance. The teacher "flattens out" their own individuality due to their understanding that this is irrelevant or unprofessional, or due to their anxiety at the potential encounter with a student presenting personal and interpersonal complexity.

Limiting the role of the teacher to conveying knowledge and demanding that the student acquire this knowledge ("I'm not responsible for her emotional problems." "I'm here to teach, and I don't have anything to offer someone who can't deal with that.")

Accusations and criticism of the student (and their family) who fails to meet the formal demands ("He's lazy and unmotivated.")

Punishment, exclusion, and encouragement to drop out due to the approach that argues that the student must do what they are told to if they want to belong to the school.

Dismissive, denigrating, and belittling approach toward the student (and their family) who fails to meet the demands (weak students, students from uneducated families, students with weak personalities, , students from a primitive culture).

Abandoning students who are "objectively" incapable of standard functioning – ("If you ask me, there are some students who shouldn't be here... Why don't they get a job? Not everyone has to study.")

### ***Dimension 2: The Teacher Lacks Skills in Developing Nurturing Interpersonal Communication and Relations with the Student and with Significant Figures in the Student's Life***

The teachers tended to argue that problematic students and their families were totally responsible for the problem, and believed that internal or environmental deficiencies meant that the students were unable to cope with the demands placed on them by the school. Teachers felt that they had little or no power to influence the success of students at risk. They were more concerned with neutralizing the disturbance caused by problem students, and less with attempting to understand their individual needs and seek appropriate responses. In most cases, the reluctance and avoidance of the teachers to enter into intimate relations with these students reflected their anxiety at the idea of accepting responsibility for students who embodied complex human situations; although in a small minority of cases the teachers over-identified with the difficulties faced by the youngsters, leading them to refrain from presenting the students with demands in terms of academic and personal progress.

### ***Dimension 3: The Teacher Implements Pedagogic Activities based on the Needs of the "Curriculum"***

In their routine educational work, the teachers' main aim was to convey the material included in the "curriculum" and to require that the students achieve the standard level in each subject. The teachers maintained a conservative definition of their function – to inculcate the knowledge and values of the dominant culture. They applied a strict division of responsibilities whereby they saw themselves as responsible for promoting the cognitive skills of the students, while the various therapeutic experts and functions in the community were seen as bearing the sole responsibility for correcting the "defects" that prevented the students from securing appropriate cognitive achievements. Through their constant effort to maintain the borders and demands of the system, the teachers led to a situation in which the students sense a lack of correlation between these demands and borders and their own subjective needs.

## **The Group of Teachers Characterized by High Capability in their Work with Students at Risk**

The testimony of teachers found to have a high level of capability showed that they manage to free themselves of educational approaches and practices that place standard, external demands at the center of the

connection between teacher and student. Instead, they open themselves to insights and actions that respond in concrete terms to students at risk. When teachers free themselves of a single objective and of the expectation that all their students should behave in an identical manner, they open themselves to the possibility of seeing the student as they really are, with all their resources and shortcomings, and of relating to their subjective needs. This process of liberation first influences the teacher, who is transformed from an object serving the requirements of the educational establishment to a subject whose educational activity is guided by their own personal approach. The liberated teacher changes their perceptions and emotional attitudes toward themselves and toward others – students, parents, and teachers. Accordingly, they act to liberate their students from their subordination to the numerous risk situations in their lives that threaten their development and their chance for self-realization. These teachers are characterized by the following factors:

***Dimension 1: The Teacher Adopts a Personal Approach that Sees the Student as a Subject with Individual Needs***

The teachers adopt an ideological and value-based approach that contains beliefs, educational attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors intended to encourage their own growth as well as the growth of students at risk. The teachers draw on their own inner world – their personality, attitudes, professional capabilities, values, and ideological standpoints, their self-awareness and their own academic and school experiences – as a key tool in their work with students at risk. The teachers learn from their own experiences, their failures and achievements, their own adolescence, the risk and protective factors in their own lives, and the ways they cope with failure and distress, distilling from all these diverse paths that can lead to development and growth. Their awareness of their own processes of change and growth enable them to interface with the themes of change and growth and with the understandings and tools needed in order to address the change and development of students in risk processes. Glasser (1998) argued that the teacher themselves constitutes a “central tool” for creating positive developments and constructive coping with students at risk. He explained that the knowledge used by teachers to help the advancement of students at risk cannot be limited to didactic expertise, but must address all the fields of knowledge that underpin human development; as part of this, teachers must learn about themselves, their personality, and their patterns of behavior and thought. As they address and influence the souls of the young people they work with, their self-awareness will serve as a key helping their engagement in this task. Glasser added

that connecting to “the person within you” (becoming a subject) demands strength of personality, independence, judgment, and a level of self-understanding that enables individuals to act of their own free will to help themselves and to secure social goals. Benzman (1987) clarifies this aspect, stating that awareness and self-criticism are not secured by attending lectures or by reading and memorizing texts. These skills develop gradually as the result of a long and ongoing process of experimentation and guidance. Accordingly, it is important that teacher training emphasize the teacher’s awareness of their own personal perspectives and attitudes and the relationships they develop in real life, in order to develop their personality and enhance their capacity to help others.

***Dimension 2: The Teacher Seeks to Develop Interpersonal Communication and to Build a Nurturing Relationship with the Student and with Significant Figures in the Student’s Life***

The teachers discussed at length the importance of the relationships they develop with their students. They stated that the students began to secure successes after mutual relations began to develop. In these relations, the teachers sought to achieve a level of intimacy that would enable them to gain a personal and immediate familiarity with their students, and to communicate with the students in a role as adults offering personal capabilities and strengths and able to attend to the students’ needs without negating their own presence. Benard (1997) confirms the crucial influence of a supportive and close relationship based on trust between the educator and the student in nurturing resilience among children and adults exposed to risk situations. She argued that such relationships can be achieved when the adult has an authentic interest in the young person and seeks a personal acquaintance. Rhodes (1994) argued that in distinction to the relationships between professional service providers and their clients, the relations between natural mentors (including teachers) and their charges are characterized by greater strength, more effective involvement, and a closer bond. Miller (1990) added that in all cases of effective responses involved a significant adult figure who helped confirm the child’s claims and thus enabled the child to accept that they had suffered an injustice.

***Dimension 3: The Teacher Implement Pedagogic Activities based on the Student’s Individual Needs***

An appropriate pedagogic response to the individual needs of the student is a key factor in the ability of teachers to develop educational responses that can

promote the meaningful development of their students. Adapting the process of teaching and education to the student develops from an ongoing effort to appraise the changing subjective needs of each student, and from the meaningful relationship that is gradually developed between the teacher as a subject and the student as a subject. As one of the teachers noted:

You have to find each student's personal North Star, to learn what they can manage and what they can't. If I can draw the right map for each one showing where they are going, then I have somewhere to go with them. There is a track, there are stops along the way, and the trick is stop each time and check what the youngster has achieved. Each destination can be reached by several routes. I use the symbol of the North Star and encourage the students to imagine themselves how far they can go on a given direction. Of course I'm open to surprises, but that isn't a substitute for my thinking in depth about each student, in order to help them make the choices that will bring them to self-realization." (Miriam)

As Brooks (1994) emphasized, the facilitator must maintain a delicate balance between strictness and enablement, providing nurturing and acceptance alongside realistic expectations. Rutter (Rutter et al., 1979) added that when schools present demands and expectations, this proves that they believe in the ability of their students and provide appropriate support enabling them to realize their true potential. High expectations alone can present a further obstacle; it is important that the expectations are realistic, and are accompanied by a reparatory experience of successful study.

In the next session, I will present the intervention model that was created following the emergence of the typology of the successful teachers at the Ramot high school case study.

### **The Psychosocial Educational Intervention Model**

In conclusion, I shall present in a nutshell the psychosocial educational intervention model, which motivates spiral processes of development including the teacher as an individual, the teachers as a team, and the school as a system. The full intervention model is presented in "Seeing the Children" (Mor, 2006).

The intervention model is based on weekly learning sessions led by a facilitator (external or internal) who leads the process of change (an expert in leading educational change whose role is to develop a high level of capability enabling the school to succeed with all its students). The facilitator works together with the school principal. Over an average period of

four years, the learning groups meet with the facilitator leading the change in various formats, from individual meetings with the principal and staff members in horizontal functions, through group sessions with staff members providing systemic care; sessions with members of the leading team; and sessions with the educational staff in various permutations (by age group, interdisciplinary teams, etc.) The members of the educational staff define areas of discomfort (a tacit process that becomes explicit with the help of the change leader) relating to the unsuitability of the educational responses provided by the school for their needs and for the developmental needs of their students. The spheres of development of the members of the educational staff during the course of these individual and group sessions relate to three axes of growth:

The first circle of development relates to the teachers' inner world and the recognition of the teacher as a subject bearing their own personal being, and embodying a complete human story with its own past of coping and crises and its own experience of alienation vis-à-vis the education system, alongside the positive dimensions present among educators who have not surrendered to the mechanization of education as a system manufacturing grades and certificates.

The second circle of development relates to the expansion of the function of the teacher and the functions of the members of staff and the transition from an emphasis on subjects and grades to an emphasis on nurturing interpersonal relationships, and on the pedagogic activity that is derived from the new understanding regarding individual needs. In order to expand the teacher's consideration of their own inner world and of the emotional world of their students, the facilitator focuses on the teacher's interpersonal world and on enhancing their ability to create nurturing relations and potential space for growth, with an emphasis on collective and team aspects.

The third circle of development seeks to institutionalize change. The facilitator guides the school as it becomes a learning, living, and dynamic organization that does not rest on its laurels, and which bases the work of the educational staff on structures that encourage "reflection on action and in action" (Schön, 1983, 1987) and in learning from successes (Rosenfeld, 1997).

A school that adopts effective educational intervention with students at risk can structure and preserve the knowledge created thereby, and can inculcate this knowledge by diverse means – peer learning,

training, the structuring of knowledge through practice, action research, and so forth (Crossan, Lane, White & Djurfelt, 1995; Crossan, Lane & White, 1999).

The principles of this approach have been (and continue to be) formulated in a large number of books, articles, and studies proving its validity and reliability (Gottlieb & Cohen, 1995; Rosenfeld, 1996; Mor, 1997; Bar Lev, 1997; Razar, Friedman & Sulimani, 2003; Mor, 2003; Cohen-Navot, & Lavanda 2003; Mor, Lourie, Chen-Gal & Siman-Tov, 2006; Mor & Louie, 2006; Rosenthal, 2005; Fleshman & Avnet, 2005; Mor & Mendelson, 2006; Mor, Diab & Ziad, 2007; Bar-Shalom, 2007(b). These studies and articles include extensive findings testifying to the positive impact of programs based on the principles of an approach that seeks to enhance the capability of educators to meet the needs of underachieving students and students at risk, and programs that encourage their personal and academic growth.

The spheres of impact of the psychosocial educational approach expand in spiral form from the field to academia and vice versa. In the second section of the article, we shall present findings relating to the introduction of this approach in teacher training for Arab students in a special education track in Arab society.

### **The Application of the Psychosocial Approach in Teacher Training**

This section of the article presents a number of findings from the study undertaken by Bar Shalom relating to the application of the approach in a pre-service context – teacher training in a college<sup>3</sup>. The intervention plan based on the psychosocial approach was developed in cooperation with the leading team of the Arab track at the education college; the program is called Tamara<sup>4</sup>. Bar Shalom attempted to identify the achievements secured by the track through the Tamara-psychosocial approach. The material in this section of the article presents findings drawn from a broader research report (Bar Shalom, 2007-a).

Representative Statements from the Interviews with Students in the Tamara program:

The general feeling in the Arab track was that the students who participated in the program gained unique tools, accompanied by a different, containing style of training and unusual new aspects, such as working in a youth at risk hostel. The combination of emotional contain-

ment and the development of social and political awareness created change in the students. The following quotes are indicative:

You realize that in the final analysis *the schools aren't interested in feeling*. The system is more interested in grades. It's funny I came to this conclusion after working in the hostel. (hostel for at risk youth)

The structure of schools, whether for Jews or Arabs, has an impact on the child's achievements. Through the course we presented latent and open dropout; here we saw the differences. The dropout rate among Arabs is much higher. The situation is bad in all schools, and particularly in Arab society. They are really producing children at risk. Some of the gaps are academic. We have to struggle over these kind of things. The emotional side, and containing the emotional needs, is no less important than achievements. Tamara raised our level of pride. We now know how to contain difficult situations. If I could succeed in a hostel, I can succeed anywhere.

In this group interview, we sense the profound process the students underwent during their work in the hostel. The youth at risk hostel seems to function as a mirror emphasizing what is lacking in the regular education system – quite possibly in the Jewish system as well as the Arab one: effective work with children at risk, including a profound acquaintance with emotional fields of content and the ability to contain complex emotional situations. The work in the hostel made the students realize what was missing. A prominent feature seen among the students is an empowerment that relates to all fields, including a Freirean realization that education is political work (Freire, 1970). Their social criticism is directed both at the educational system in the society in which they function and also at the institutionalized discrimination that leads to some of the social phenomena they are required to address.

### **The Change in the Style of Training**

See the comments of two facilitators who were involved in the program from the first stage, when it was inculcated among the student body as a whole. The interviews with these facilitators showed that the Tamara program provided aspects of training that had been missing:

Yasser: I opened up to it, especially when they told me that although there are guidelines, the program's open to different directions. The in-

<sup>3</sup> The David Yellin College of Education, Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> A joint program of the David Yellin College and the Ashlim association.

dividual and group meetings with Khansaa<sup>5</sup> helped me to understand where I was going, and I wasn't in the pilot group. It caused a dramatic change in my approach, and I am a classic diagnostic – I studied the dichotomic approach – above and below the average, the norm. The psychosocial educational approach was something I really needed.

Diana: Tamara gets you to look at your own inner world. Everyone has something inside us that we need to examine, to work out what it is that is holding us back, or to enable development and growth. Usually we miss the person themselves when we use the technical approach. We have to identify those processes that allow people to grow.

The facilitators' comments present a critical observation of the technical approach, which does not permit the examination of the student's inner world. Their comments imply that the program fills this need. The balance of the emotional side of teaching work is consonant with the conclusions of Sonia Nieto, who notes in her study of outstanding and effective teachers that their comments focus mainly on their emotional bonds with the students and on their inner world (Nieto, 2005). It is also notable that the facilitators sense that the program is constructed to enable the staff to undergo a process and to become more professional while enhancing their capacity to work with alienated youth and youth at risk.

The two facilitators emphasize the positive influence of the program on the students who participated:

Yasser: Today the students told me that it's real fun for them studying in Tamara. They have all kinds of different assignments, but they all said that Tamara is the most fun. They added sessions above the minimum number they were required to attend.

Diana: The students have a better connection with the students they work with. They perceive the student's successes as their own success. They are more connected to the student in every possible sense.

The comments clearly indicate that the program helps the trainee teachers to connect with their students in a more meaningful way and to develop a deeper sense of commitment. Again, we see that Tamara has become a desired brand, and advanced students ask to receive training in the spirit of the program.

The two facilitators discuss the difficulties and challenges encountered in the program that provide

an incentive for growth for both themselves and their students:

Yasser: There are problems with some really hard cases. When there's a very hard case, I try to consult with the other facilitators. For example, a student of mine was working with a girl, and during the year she decided she didn't want to continue. We had some problems with consistency. There were some cases when things didn't go the way we expected, but in our meetings with Avshalom (one of the facilitators in the program), we usually managed to find a solution. Nothing is perfect, but the positive outweighs the negative. We learn from the exceptional cases to help in the future. I constantly learn from these cases – I'm only in a process of development, I'm not claiming that I've got it all. I turn to Khansaa when I need help or clarifications, and outside the college I turn to the school consultants, social workers, and psychologists in order to receive further information in the emotional field.

A real example from just two days ago – and something I found incredible. There was a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade student whose parents had got divorced – I knew all about what had happened during the divorce from the student who worked with her. The little girl wanted to stage a play, and we worked on it a lot, and she put on this play about how her parents got divorced. I was amazed that she had the courage to present it all. I am convinced that it was a kind of present for the student.

The home visits really help them to build up trust. Until the visit, the child may wonder what the student is going to tell their father or the principal, but after the visit there is real trust, because the student doesn't reveal anything to the kid's father. That strengthens the relationship and creates confidence and trust and things flow better. This happened in many cases.

Diana: What we do in the hostel is that the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students work with young guys aged 18-20 – men and women who have been through traumas. Our students try to establish a relationship with them. At first it was hard for me and for them. You can't give them a list of what to do. You have to believe in it in order to connect to the person you're working with. Now I realize that it's the most amazing thing we did in Tamara.

It was a real experience in the hostel. It's a pity that this part of the program is only two hours a week, with a special support course. It was

<sup>5</sup> The Tamara's program director at the College.



important to learn about the success and disappointments, and to see the strong dependence that sometimes developed. For me it was both new and familiar; each time I had to cope with a different problem, support and encourage them. I really enjoyed it. But they saw that working with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student is different than working with a 16 year-old girl who has been raped.

Despite the inherent difficulties of working with people at risk, on various levels, the facilitators feel that they and the students have gained a profound experience, with support and help enabling them to contain the complex experience they underwent in the field.

In these interviews, I found further corroboration for the impression that the program provides its participants with tools for coping effectively with the needs that arise in work with youth at risk. The students encounter complex challenges and receive broad-based support in this intense and multifaceted experience. It was apparent that the facilitators feel that the program as developed also enables the facilitators and instructors to undergo a process of growth and professionalization, enhancing their capability to cope with alienated youth and youth at risk.

## Summary and Conclusions

"I can't learn from you unless you accept me and find value in me because of who I am and what I am" (Tatum, 1999).

The findings of this study show that the Tamara program provides its participants with unique tools for coping with youth at risk. The training takes place through a profound process whereby the trainee teacher is encouraged to gain a meaningful and in-depth acquaintance with the student, including home visits, systematic monitoring of the student's development, a broad-based support network, and the creation of a learning group. The program gives its graduates a sense of professionalism and prestige. They feel that they are "more than teachers." Accordingly, the program justifies its academic title – the psychosocial educational approach, a name that implies the expansion of the spheres to be addressed by the teachers of the future to aspects that were not previously considered part of their function. These aspects were transferred to "experts" – a process that Mor argues merely served to encourage the pathologization of youngsters at risk, rather than enabling the system to contain them and to accept full and genuine responsibility.

In the program, the student-teacher realizes the power structure within which they, the pupil, their school, and their family operate. Consequently, they come to see themselves as a positive agent for change

both for the pupil at risk and for the surrounding community. This approach presents parallel axes of action, and prevents the student losing sight of the "big picture."

Arab students form part of a minority that suffers exclusion and institutionalized discrimination (Golan-Agnon, 2004). The program helps them become far more aware of the political issue, and they aspire to achieve change from a situation of inequality, racism, and a failing, outmoded, and fossilized education system. It may be hoped that, in the future, the graduates of the program will be able to run frameworks operating in the spirit of the psychosocial educational approach, providing the teachers who work in these frameworks with the ability to create a learning community in which every student enjoys a genuine opportunity to grow, express themselves, take part in the community, and experience representation and respect. (For examples of schools in Israel in which teachers seem to be working according to the psychosocial approach (see Bar Shalom, 2006. See also Deborah Meier's work in East Central Park School in New York, Meier, 2002). As graduates of the Tamara program integrate in the system, it remains to be seen whether they will be able to create such frameworks in Arab society in Israel, which faces budgetary discrimination, as well as outmoded prevailing approaches that are contrary to everything expected of a school that seeks to follow the psychosocial educational approach.

Teachers at the college who have recently begun to work in the Tamara program, and who did not previously have any direct contact with the program, such as Dr. Shafiq Masalha, comment that they have encountered "these students in one of my psychology classes, and I see an enormous difference in terms of their ability to understand the complexity of situations, and to understand the theory relating to practical work in the field." Masalha added that he has been teaching at the college for many years, but has never before encountered such a special spirit among the students. He conceptualized this as a feeling of capacity and empowerment they have gained through their participation in the program.

They were pleased to see that Tamara was not "just another program," but a meaningful catalyst for change and for the creation of a learning and supportive community.

The most important difficulty the program encounters still lies ahead, and at this stage presents a great unknown: Will the students be able to survive on a long-term basis in the field once (and if) they lose the support networks provided by the program? Will they create alternative frameworks such as those developed at Meier's school (see above)? Will they be able to create schools that Darling-Hammond frames as "caring communities? (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Will the field push them toward conformity, diluting their enthusiasm? It will be worthwhile to examine these aspects in a further study in several years' time.

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