

Mothers as educators: the empowerment of rural Muslim women in Israel and their role in advancing the literacy development of their children

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In 2003-2005, the authors implemented Success for All (SFA)-ALASH, an innovative pedagogical program to facilitate students' advancement in literacy, and School Family Partnership program (SFP) among first and second graders in two neighboring, rural, and low-SES Arab villages. The teachers implemented SFA-ALASH, combining bi-weekly workshops for the mothers to enhance their role as facilitators of literacy at home, according to Epstein's six-folded model (1995, 2001, 2006). Mothers' perceptions in creating a home environment which inspires their children to become successful learners in the school were evaluated using: 1. Participant observations of SFP activities 2. Semi-structured interviews with 47 SFP mothers. The teacher's evaluation of each child's academic performance in reading, writing and math as well as the mothers' familiarity and her participation in the programs. Findings indicate that the SFA-ALASH programs elevated the student's achievements. The teachers' evaluations of their students' academic achievements correspond with the mothers' involvement in the SFP and their active academic and social interactions with their children at home. The paper will discuss the cultural and social empowerment and transformations of the rural lower SES Muslim women via school partnership.

Introduction

The concern with enhancing the academic achievements of students from low SES, minority groups has led to increased emphasis on parental involvement to aid children's learning at home and there assistance with homework. However, these parental interventions were not conductive in closing the achievement gap. According to Mattingly, Prislun, Mckenzie, Roolriguez and Kayzar (2002), parental interventions that are not part of broader educational reform that incorporates changes in the school curriculum and the teachers' practices could not elevate students' achievements.

This study outlines an attempt to elevate the achievements of Arab minority students by introducing innovative pedagogical approaches to assist their literacy advancement coupled with parental involvement as facilitators of reading and writing at home. The study will relate to the socio- and ethnic background of the Israeli-Arab population in Israel as a minority and the ethnic characteristics of the two villages. The theoretical background of educational programs will be described and analyzed highlighting the active role the mothers perused as facilitators of literacy at home and its implication on the children's academic growth, schools and the Arab rural communities.

The Arabs as a minority group in Israel

The Arabs in Israel are the remaining minority of a large, affluent, educated urban

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population that fled Palestine to nearby Arab states during the 1948 war (Rinnawi, 1996).

They share the same social, cultural, ethnic, and other identity characteristics with citizens of Arab nations. However, they differ because they are a minority in a Jewish state. Today, they number 1.3 million people, making up 19% of Israel's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

The Arabs in Israel are ambivalent towards both the traditional and the western world, as well as in their national identity. At times, they have felt alienated from the Western world as represented by Jewish society, often feeling that it threatens their traditional value system; this is reflected in the growing movement towards Islam (Rinnawi, 2003). Conversely, they enjoy the democratic, western way of life in Israel, primarily the high level of development, the welfare and health services, and particularly the education, which they regard as a means of social and economic advancement (Smootha, 2004).

About half of Israel's Arab population lives in small towns and villages of less than 20,000 citizens and in all-Arab neighborhoods. They are surrounded by large extended families "Hamula" (Clan) that range between in size from 50 to 500 members. Cultural norms and the economic structure have preserved a high degree of interdependence within the Arab society in Israel. The daily life is led under the umbrella of the extended family, the Hamula, including the local government, economic projects and education (Abu Baker & Dwairy, 2003).

The women, by Moslem religious laws and by tradition, are in custody and control of the males in their families, but are expected to be submissive to the male and subordinate, regardless of their age, education, profession, or social status (Ahmed, 1992; Walther, 1995; Badran, 1996). The great majority of them are housewives; the employment rate is 17%, compared with 54% among Jewish women. The average number of children is 4.6, compared with 2.6 among Jewish women.

Under Israeli law, school attendance is required between the age of 5 and 17. Among low-SES Arabs, education is perceived as particularly important, as they were denied the opportunity to be educated when they were younger.

Arab schools did not acquire a leading role in the processes of modernization and the social changes the Arab community underwent (Mar'i, 1978). They were not eager to implement child-centered educational reform presented by the Israeli Ministry of Education. This is reflected in the hierarchy organizational leadership of the schools which distance the principal, from the teachers and students, and in the conventional

teacher and curriculum centered teaching methods. Equally, parental involvement with the schools was not encouraged (Al-Haj, 1998).

In view of that, the parents were excluded from the schools governance and its educational processes and indifferent to the schools and their policies. Consequently, the conduct of the educational staff has not been publicly monitored. This granted the educational staff freedom of action, and has led them to view the parents as detached and indifferent towards the school and lacking appreciation and respect towards their educational efforts (Rinnawi, 1996).

The Rural Arab Villages

The study was conducted in two Arab villages located in eastern-central Israel, and bordering the West Bank and relatively remote from other villages. 90% of the residents of these villages are orthodox Moslems. The social structure is organized around the Hamulas and led by the strong leadership of the Muchtar (Religious-social leader), who oversees civic-legal matters of the villagers such as heritage, domestic disputes etc. Zallafa village is home to 689 Hamulas with 3351 members; Salem village has a population of 232 Hamulas and 1145 residents. The majority of the residents are of low-middle income with a very high rate (35%) of unemployment (4 times higher than the average unemployment rate in Israel). Most of the women are housewives and only few women who have higher education, are employed outside the villages.

The elementary school in Zallafa includes 600 students and the primary school in Salam includes 335 students from first to eighth grades. Until 2006, when the middle and high school were built in Salem, the students commuted to nearby villages. The average class size in both schools is 25 students. In both schools, most of the teachers are male and reside in the villages.

Literacy Development at the school

The recognition that literacy development is essential for the academic advancement of all students, particularly for at-risk children in the elementary schools, encouraged the school's superintendent and the two school principals in the villages to introduce SFA and ALASH in their schools. Also implemented was the School Family Partnership (SFP) program, to empower the mothers to augment their children's literacy success at home.

The SFA-ALASH programs seek to give all children the skills and tools to become competent readers and effective writers, so that every child can succeed. SFA was developed in the United States (Slavin, Madden, Dolan & Wasik, 1996). The program was adopted and implemented in

Israel, building on the tradition of Cooperative Learning in Israel. Since 1993, SFA -ALASH have been implemented in Jewish and Arab schools in northern Israel (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Schaedel, 1998; Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2001; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Schaedel, 2003; Schaedel & Hertz-lazarowitz, 2005).

SFA-ALASH combines effective reading and writing practices for beginning reading, including cooperative learning methods for students at risk and directs all aspects of school and classroom organization toward the goal of preventing academic deficits from appearing at the initial stages of literacy development using intervening measures with a rich and full curriculum to enable students to build on their firm foundation in basic skills (Slavin, Stevens & Madden, 1988).

The curriculum in first grade includes the teachers reading of children's literature and engaging the children in discussions of stories to enhance their understanding of the story essentials, story structure, specific comprehension skills, meta-cognitive strategies for self-assessment and integration of reading and writing.

In the second grade, cooperative-learning activities are built around story structure, predictions, summarization, vocabulary building, decoding practice, and story-related writing. The curriculum materials (reading books and worksheet assignments are developed by the school teachers and they vary according to the religious and cultural group affiliation in Israel (Jews, Arabs, Druze). Cooperative learning methods such as: Jigsaw and group investigation are integrated in the lessons to increase students' motivation and higher thinking. Story related writing and creative writing is also shared within teams. The classroom learning environment supplies students with libraries they can read and take home. Home readings are shared via presentations, summaries, drama, portfolio and other formats in the classroom.

SFP- Theoretical Background

Family involvement has been perceived as a strategy for raising low-income students' achievement (Sleeter & Grant, 1988). While some of the problems underlying the achievement gap include school-related factors, such as curriculum and teacher quality, student and family-related factors, such as students' cultural background or families' literacy practices and supportive home environment for school learning, also play an important role. Sleeter and Grant (1988) relate the source of achievement gap to the cultural and socioeconomic background of the students. The low achievement of minority low-SES children relate to te families lack of necessary resources or experiences and their low aspirations or

expectations for their children's academic achievement.

Contrary to the "deficiency" theory, there are consistent findings indicating that minority and low-income families have high aspirations for their children's academic success (Fan, 2001; Hall, Kurtz-Costes & Mahoney, 1997). Parents from minority and low-income families reflect on their own negative experiences as motivating aspirations and concerns for their children to succeed at school. They also use their own lack of educational or work experiences to motivate their children to succeed. (Aspiazu, Bauer & Spillett, 1998; Auerbach, 2002; O'connor; 2001).

Banks (1995) suggests that "the school must help low-income students to overcome the deficits that result from their early family and community experience" (p.15). Furthermore, Mattingly et al. (2002) suggested that interventions ought to be aimed at increasing family involvement and focus on changing parental behavior- especially in the areas of parenting and supporting home learning.

The SFP program in this study is based on Epstein's work (1995, 2001, 2006). Epstein's conceptual framework model is holistic in nature and it incorporates educational, social and psychological perspectives of social organization of schools and learning contexts. The model is six folded and underlines the areas which empower the partnership between families and schools in areas such as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995, 2001, 2006).

The SFP workshop activities

Since SFA-ALASH and SFP were the first educational reform programs undertaken by the schools, at the outset of the programs in 2002, the teachers and parents were invited to visit the Jewish primary school Shazar in Acre (a mixed Arab-Jewish city), which has been successfully implementing SFA-ALASH and SFP programs since 1995. The visit was intended to familiarize the staff and the mothers with the programs and the ways in which they can enhance the literacy growth of their children, as well as and their own role as facilitators of literacy at home. Transportation was provided by the schools and the teachers. Sixty mothers and the two principles visited the school in Acre. Following the lessons observations the hosting school principle Mrs. Fireman, the teachers and mothers explained to their visitors the contributions of the programs in advancing the academic growth and student's achievements in grades 1-6. The visit helped remove misconceptions and encouraged the mothers to become actively evolved in the program and to recruit other reluctant mothers to participate in the workshops.

To maximize the mothers' participation in the program and workshops, a committee of mothers was formed in each classroom to encourage disinclined mothers of low literacy aptitude and illiterate mothers, to participate in the workshops and support their efforts to aid their children with homework assignments, or arrange for other family members (siblings or neighbors) to assist their children with homework and reading.

The mothers participated in bi-weekly workshops at the schools during lunch. The teachers, Arab writers and educational experts from the University of Haifa, introduced various methods of reading children's books, developing creative writing, and artwork. Literacy of the home environment and its importance were stressed, and the mothers were encouraged to help their children buy their own books. In addition, experts in early child-development such as psychologists, pedagogical counselors from Jewish and Arab agencies discussed with the mothers such issues as: discipline, conflict resolutions, setting effective time tables for their children at home, nourishment and free-time activities.

The mothers were encouraged to visit the school and become familiar with the SFA-ALASH programs. They were invited to assist the teacher, and participate in festival celebrations at school and the importance of frequent communication with the teacher by means of notes, visitation, telephone, and their feedback to worksheet and portfolios was equally underlined.

Method

A. Participants

The Teachers: All seven teachers of the first and second grades were native citizens of the villages (with the exception of one female teacher who resided in the neighboring village). Their ages ranged between 32-49 years, married with 3-4 children (with the exception of one female teacher). They were educated in nearby Arabic teachers colleges and maintain a teaching certificate for Arab primary school.

The Mothers: 47 mothers who participated in the SFP program were interviewed. They were Moslem (wearing veils and traditional clothes). Their ages ranged from 25-60 years. Most of the mothers were housewives; their education ranged from 6-12 years of education; only five had obtained higher education. The great majority was of low-middle SES and the family size range was 4-9 people in the household (Table 1, Appendix).

B. Measures

Two measures were used in this study; the interview with the mothers and the teachers'

evaluation form (TEF) of their students and the mothers' participation in the SFP program. The evaluation of the mother's involvement with the SFA-ALASH and SFP programs was based on the analysis of the mothers' interviews and the teachers' evaluation of their involvement in the SFP program.

1. *The mothers' interviews:* Personal interviews were conducted with the mothers throughout the second year of the program (2003-2004). They were interviewed in a quiet room at the schools after they participated in various activities such as workshops, ceremonies and voluntary assistance to the teacher at the classrooms. Four students (two Israeli-Arab and two Israeli-Jewish students) that were on the research team conducted the interviews. The duration of each interview was 45-60 minutes. The Arabic speaking mothers were interviewed by the Arab students, while mothers who were also fluent in Hebrew were interviewed by the Jewish students. The interviews were semi-structured, based on previous research on ALASH-SFA and SFP programs in Acre (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2001; 2004; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Horovitz, 2002; Horovitz, 2001; Zelniker & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2005) and related to the present study.

2.

The Teachers' Evaluation: The teachers assessed the involvement of the mothers in the SFP program using the TEF form. This was scored using a scale of 1 (definitely incorrect-low) to 5 (definitely correct-high) for each question item. The second measure was the child's academic progress - grading their achievements in reading, writing and in math on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

Results

Interview data:

The interviews were analyzed based on the following six themes:

A. Encouragement of reading and writing at home: The great majority of the mothers reported that their children spend one-two hours per day preparing homework. They indicated their supporting part in such activities as reading with the child, help with writing (grammar), assistance with dictations, and math exercises. They were aware of their own role as literacy facilitators at home, and they employed various methods according to their available time, and their own efficiency, level of education and the skills they acquired in the SFP workshops. This was echoed in their interviews: *"I only help her when she does not understand. I want her to develop self confidence, so that she can be self-sufficient. We spend a lot of time painting and drawing and also*

playing with various games that develop her to concentration and memory".

Some of the mothers mentioned their husband's involvement and help with homework assignments or buying their children reading books. Others even had a private tutor to aid their child: *"I think that my child deserves only the best and my husband and I are willing to pay a private tutor to aid my child although she is doing well at school."* Others, who realized their inability to aid their children (lack of adequate education) and limited financial resources arranged for older brothers or sisters to assist their children: *"I don't help my daughter. My older daughter helps her with math and writing assignments...I don't read or write". -" Her older sisters help her with the homework. They understand the math and I can take care of my younger children".*

They showed their children their satisfaction and pride when the homework was properly prepared by providing praise and awards: *"I make sure that I praise my daughter after she reads with me, I tell her that she is such an excellent reader and that I am very proud of her".*

B. Parent-child interaction at home: The mothers indicated that they make sure to spend quality time with the child since there are no extra-curricular activities in the two villages. Each of the mothers developed her own activities which depended on her skills and financial means. They bought books for their children or let their child choose their own books. Others assisted the child with art work or choose to travel with them to nearby interesting sites: *"We travel each Saturday to interesting places. We visited the University of Haifa and the other time we traveled to the zoo..."*.

Some had their child attend an extra-curricular activity (available only in the nearby city): *"My daughter started a dancing course in the nearby city of Afula... my husband drives her once a week to the dancing course".*

They expressed different opinions in regard to the routine, timetable and boundaries expected of their children. Some mentioned strict boundaries for homework *"I review with my daughter the things she learned at school, and we go over the materials for the next day, so she will be prepared for school"*, and setting time boundaries for watching T.V. during the day and evening. Others were less stringent *"I let my son do his homework on his own, and I help him only when he needs help...I read to my child half an hour before bedtime"*. The others maintained that their child should be self-sufficient and assume responsibility on his free time and homework assignments *" My daughter has no set times for her homework, she makes them whenever she feels like. She is very independent and she does not need my supervision or help"*.

C. Home environment that supports literacy enrichment: Most home environments had minimal resources for literacy development of young children. The homes had a few religious books and the parents mainly read weekend newspapers. Following the workshops, some of the mothers reported that they had started assembling a small library of children's books, which they read with their children. Others realized that their child should have a private space to prepare homework: *"Now my son has his own desk in his room and he prepares his homework there. I keep his door open, so he can call and ask me if he needs my help. This is much better than it used to be before when he did his homework on the kitchen table"*. They mentioned their interest in the child's progress at school and the discussions they have with the child about schools, and the importance of education as a mean for better life:

D. Mothers' involvement with the school: The SFP program increased the mothers' involvement with the schools. This was reflected in well over 50% attendance in each of the workshops which the teachers considered as a high rate of attendance.

Their visits to the schools and other communications they used with the teachers were much higher than it was before the SFP program. This was echoed by the principals' of S. comment: *"The mothers of the first and second grades have become part of the school. They often visit the teachers and volunteer to help. Since they are often in the school they also talk with me and the other teachers and now I feel that the school has become a popular place in the village"*

Three levels of mothers' involvement with the schools emerged from the interviews: 1. Highly involved mothers (H): Thirty seven mothers (78%) (Table 2, Appendix), regularly attended the workshops, and implemented all the skills and behaviors encouraged by the teachers and lecturers at the workshops. They visited the schools often (in addition to the workshops) and volunteered to help the teacher. *"I visit the teacher nearly every week. I ask the teacher about my daughter's progress at school and I also ask the teacher if I can help her"*.

2. Moderately involved mothers (M): Six mothers (12.0%). However the difference between these mothers, and the former group, was that although they attended the workshops regularly and reported implementing the interventions with their child, they contacted the teacher or visited the school infrequently - usually if they had something specific issue to discuss with the teacher: *"I don't visit the school very often. I know what goes on at school. I come to school only when I have a special question or if I don't understand"*

something."

3. Low involved mothers (L): Four of the mothers (8.5%) did not attend the workshops regularly. They rarely visited the school and did invested little effort in implementing the recommended interventions at home and their child's homework: *"My connections with the school are not very strong" - "I don't read or write, so I hardly attend the work shops. I come to school very little (one of the mothers told me that it is important to talk with the teacher), so I came with my older daughter and the teachers explained to her how to help with the homework"*

E. Mother's expectations of her child's education: Most of the mothers had high expectations for their children. They anticipated that their children will excel at school so in the future they can pursue higher education in a prestigious university and become a lawyer or a physician-doctor: *"It is important that my daughter will be an excellent student so in the future she will study at a university and become a physician"*. Other mothers emphasized their expectations for their child's present success at school as most important.

F. Mother's familiarity and satisfaction with the SFA-ALASH & SFP programs: Most of the mothers stated that they were familiar with the programs and were aware of their importance in fostering their participation with the school and their child's academic growth: *"I attend the workshop... they help to improve the relations between the teacher and the children...It is very important to look for ways to improve the children's progress and make them more interested in the learning in school" "The new programs advanced the reading and writing of my younger child a lot. He reads fluently and writes long stories. I never saw this with my older children in the second grade"*.

The great majority of the mothers expressed great satisfaction with the program. They were very content with the reading and writing progress of their children. They appreciated the impact of the programs in advancing their children's effectiveness in reading and in writing and their affects on creativity and interest in reading: *"My daughter reads now fluently, she is able to talk about the books and draw nicely. She loves reading"*. They valued the fact that now the teacher-child interactions in the classroom are based on respect and genuine interest of the teacher in the child's progress, and appreciated the variety of innovative methods that the teachers used in their classes. They realized that their involvement in the school positively affects their child's self-esteem: *"My son sees me at school and it makes him feel good, and*

important...that means, that he is very important and learning is important". They also indicated that the program helped them become a better parent and acquire skills needed to support the academic development of their children: *"No one told me before how to help my child to prepare his homework, or what is good for my child. Now, I watch T.V. programs that talk about being a better parent. What a clever idea it was to work and teach the mothers"*.

The teachers' evaluation of the parents in the SFP program

The teachers evaluated the mother's involvement in the SFP program on the TEF on the following three items: a. Familiarity with SFA-ALASH, b. interaction with the school, c. Involvement with the child at home. In addition, each teacher evaluated the child's academic achievements in reading and writing (Arabic) and in Math.

The teachers' evaluation of the mothers' involvement and familiarity with the program and their level of education and SES were analyzed in relation to the student's achievements (Table 2, Appendix). The Chi. Sq. test indicates that mother's involvement had a significant impact (Chi Sq.=34.35, Cramer=.64, p=.00) on the student's achievements. However, the mother's level of education (Chi. Sq.=3.95, Cramer=.21, p<.41) and their S.E.S (Chi Sq.=5.61, Cramer=.24, p=.23) had no significant impact on the student's achievements.

According to Table 2 (Appendix), the achievements of forty of the students were very high (4-5) and only 4 students had lower grades than 3 (on a scale of 1-5). The high achievements corresponded with the high evaluation by the teachers to the mother's involvement and familiarity with the program. Although 29 mothers had less than 12 years of education and 15 were of low SES, their children's academic achievements were very high. Nonetheless, children with low achievements were all from a low-SES background.

Discussion

The qualitative findings of this study, as well as prior studies with Arab schools in northern Israel (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003; Schaedel & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2005), indicate that pedagogic intervention using SFA-ALASH and SFP positively affects schools, children, mothers and communities. These programs have introduced effective, innovative curriculum instructions for teaching Arabic in rural Arab schools. They also exposed the participants to a child-centered, constructivist approach to literacy development, replacing the traditional teacher-centered and

route-learning methods. This pedagogy encouraged language enrichment and novel curriculum implementation, with cooperative learning becoming the main teaching mode, thus encouraging multiple avenues of interactions in the classrooms between the teachers and children and among the children. This was extended to the teaching staff within the school, enhancing cooperation and shared planning of curriculum materials and evaluation processes. The programs led to positive changes in the learning environment in the classrooms and to the addition of libraries for the children at school and at home. The egalitarian classroom culture enabled students to express themselves more creatively through creative writing, art, drama and music. As a second grader student noted: *"I love my classroom. I can talk with my friends in my group, I help them, but I also like to hear their opinions. I especially like when our group acts up the stories in front of the class"*.

Gains in students' achievements: Literacy development and fluent command in the mother language are key elements for children's success in school, particularly in low S.E.S communities where the great majority of children are high-risk. In Israel, literacy development is a key factor in the achievement gap between Arab and Jewish children from first grade to university (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001). At the elementary school level, the gap is explained by several factors. One factor is the unique linguistic challenges Arab children face in acquiring high levels of reading and writing (Abu-Rabia, 2000, 2001, 2002); When Arab children start first grade, they are familiar only with the spoken Arabic language. Meanwhile, literacy development in reading and writing at school is in literary Arabic, presenting great difficulties, particularly for children from families with low levels of education, who are not familiar with literary Arabic. As a result, from the very first grades of elementary school, 20%-30% of the students, mainly of low SES, do not learn to read and write properly (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Schaedel, 2003). These deficiencies escalate, culminating in a 70% failure rate in the matriculation exams among Arab students (compared to 50% of the Jewish students).

The SFA-ALASH and SFP programs elevated the students' academic achievements in Arabic and in math. This is based on the teachers' evaluation and in their test results at the end of 2004 (according to the teachers reports). These results are in line with former evaluation studies of SFA-ALASH and SFP in Israel, examining the impact of the programs in advancing literacy achievements of Jewish and Arab students when compared with comparison groups (Hertz-

Lazarowitz & Schaedel, 2003; Horovitz, 2001; Tov Li, 2003; Schaedel & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2005). The students' elevated achievements can be attributed to the quality of the educational programs and to the high levels of implementation of all its pedagogical aspects, as well as the relentless efforts of the school principals and the teachers to implement the programs.

Another key factor in the children's high achievements may be the mothers' partnership with the school and their interactions with their children at home. Based on our ongoing observations of the programs' implementation at the schools, and the analysis of the mothers' interviews and the teacher's evaluation of the mother's involvement in the SFP program, we suggest that the mothers' active involvement in the SFP program had a major contribution to advancing their children's achievements.

Regardless of SES or level of education, the mothers assumed a major role in the literacy development of their children. They were fully aware of their own responsibility in advancing their child's academic development and tried to do their best to provide an appropriate literacy environment at home, assisting with homework, and with extra-curriculum reading and writing including art work at home and otherwise seeking enrichment extra-curriculum activities outside of the village. The shortcomings (no available extra-curriculum activities in the villages), did not modify their desire to augment their child's enrichment and they found ways and means to fulfill their yearnings. They became more resourceful in arranging the best extra-curricular activities for their children. They were determined to implement the skills and knowledge gained from experts to improve their parenting skills and valued the positive changes in their children's academic and personal development (Table 2, Appendix). Most of the mothers had high expectations for their children's academic progress in class and for further higher education. Those expectations were common to all mothers, regardless of their level of education or their SES.

The mothers put a meticulous, sustained effort into ensuring the necessary opportunities and relationships within their homes, the school and the community to successfully raise their children so they will acquire respectable professions in the future. For the lower SES and unskilled mothers, these expectations were intended to provide a brighter future for their children, unlike their own: *"I want my daughter to be a teacher, not just a housewife like me" - "I want my son to become a lawyer and have an easy job. I don't want him to work hard like his father who is always very tired when he comes home"*.

The mother's high expectations of their children in this study correspond with similar findings reported by Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996), who studied low-SES minority groups in America. Parents' high expectations of their children and their deep involvement with their children's work in school and at home had a positive impact on their children's academic achievement. Similar findings regarding the positive impact of high parental expectations on their children's achievements were found when coupled with parents' interventions at home supporting homework and positive feedback to the child's academic work among Jewish families in Israel (Saginer, 1984).

The mothers who experienced SFP for an extended period (mothers of second graders) were more involved with the program. They expressed their deep satisfaction from their involvement with the school and spent more time at home assisting their children. Mothers whose older children studied with the older, traditional methods highlighted the differences in their children's progress in literacy: *"I feel that my younger daughter has a good command of reading and writing in the second grade. Her reading comprehension and her creative writing are far better than her older brothers and sisters and she enjoys reading books"*.

The mothers' transformation helped them strengthen their families and alter their situation within the family; from compliant rural housewives to proactive women who hold high expectations for their children. They were motivated to expand on their parental skills to help their children and willing to enlist their time, energies and limited financial resources as well as other family members to promote the successful academic development of their children.

Within the broader sphere of school and the community interactions, SFA-ALAS and SFP changed the distant-detached nature of school-community affairs (Al-Haj, 1998; Ma'ri, 1978; Rinnawi, 1996). The schools assumed a central role in bringing social and educational changes to the Arab rural communities. The mothers' interactions with the schools helped the schools become more accommodating of the children's and parents' needs. Likewise, the schools' staff members became more responsive to the parents' ideas and suggestions and were more willing to consider the parents as equal partners for decision making processes and the parents became more responsive to school changes introduced by teachers. The findings indicate that when schools and mothers intentionally link with each other to improve learning and developmental outcomes for children the families and communities gain from the process.

The study presents new ideas for closing the achievement gap in Israel's Arab schools by implementing pedagogical and parental interventions to become more responsive to the global and local needs of schools, children, families and communities.

In the future, more literacy pedagogies should be linked to the SFP program, as it seems that parents, especially mothers, are interested in learning and applying home-based strategies and practices to advance their children, and that teachers value the mothers' commitment as a powerful vehicle for literacy development during the critical time of the first years in the school. More research should be conducted using qualitative and quantitative methods to learn more on the short and long terms effect of SFP programs.

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Appendix

Table 1: Parents' background variables

Education	Mothers		Fathers		Family	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than 6 years	2	4.2	2	4.2		
6 years	1	2.1	3	6.3		
7-9 years	17	36.1	17	36.1		
10-12 years	6	12.7	4	8.5		
Full High school	15	31.9	15	31.9		
Higher Education	6	12.7	6	12.7		
Age						
25-30	18	38.2	3	6.3		
31-35	15	31.9	20	42.5		
36-40	8	17.02	6	12.7		
41-50	6	12.7	15	31.9		
51-60	0	0	3	6.3		
Level of Income SEL						
Low					12	25.5
Middle					30	63.8
High					5	10.6
Size of family						
3 people					1	2.1
4					4	8.5
5					13	27.6
6					11	23.4
7					10	21.2
8					6	2.7
9					2	4.2

Table 2: Teachers' evaluation of student's achievements and mother's involvement in the SFP program

Teacher's evaluation of the child's achievements	N	Teachers' evaluation of the mother's involvement in SFP program			Mother's years of schooling					Mother's SES level		
		H*	M	L	6	7-9	10-11	12	Higher education	H	M	L
*1-5												
5	25	24	1			7	6	8	3	4	16	5
4.7	5	4				2		1		1		2
4.5	2	3			1	1	1		1		3	3
4	8	5	2		1	4		2	1	2	3	1
3.5	3	1	2	1	1	2					1	1
3	2		1	1	2						2	1
2.7	1			1		1						1
2	1			1				1				1
Total	47	37	6	4	5	17	7	13	5	7	25	15

*Highest grade being 5 and lowest grade being 1.
 H=High involvementM=Moderate involvement
 **L= Low involvement

