

South Tel Aviv school is a model for language intervention

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Bialik-Rogozin, a school in South Tel Aviv with an underprivileged student body hailing from 48 different countries, is the subject of the 2011 Oscar-winning documentary short *Strangers No More*. But before the cameras rolled, researchers at Tel Aviv University had been helping its students overcome the barriers to language development that often handicap children raised by immigrants or refugees.

Their program, which involves group and one-on-one sessions with clinicians and Tel Aviv University students, is run by Prof. Liat Kishon-Rabin of TAU's Department of Communication Disorders at the Sackler Faculty of Medicine. Her program takes a multipronged approach to help students improve in different areas of [language acquisition](#), including comprehension skills, vocabulary, and writing.

Presented at the annual Israeli Speech and Hearing Association Conference by senior clinician Shira Cohen, this model can be implemented across the globe, the researchers say. Many countries are home to such immigrant or refugee families, where children could be getting increased support for language development. The program, funded by the Landa Foundation, has been an unqualified success.

A multilingual background means multiple challenges

The population of the school at Bialik-Rogozin is made up of a large number of refugees fleeing their home countries to make a better life for

themselves abroad. With often tumultuous pasts that include few [educational opportunities](#), these children are facing many challenges — among them low socioeconomic status, behavior issues, and delayed language development.

"Many of these children don't actually have a 'mother tongue,'" says Prof. Kishon-Rabin, explaining that often, parents emigrate from separate countries, and do not share a common first language to pass on to their children. "At home, their parents often speak broken English or Hebrew, and the child is only exposed to this pigeon-like speech. They're exposed to three or more languages, but none of them are spoken properly." Intervention began when a group at Tel Aviv University decided to offer the students hearing tests, and during these tests the researchers discovered how poor the students' language development was.

Beginning with a group of 24 students in first grade, Prof. Kishon-Rabin and her team, which included Cohen, Dr Shoshie Rabinowitz, and other trained speech therapists as well as students from TAU's Department of Communications Disorders, provided weekly sessions with special emphasis on natural and social language skills to help the children develop efficient communication in and outside of the classroom.

Over the course of the year-long program, the students not only showed an improvement in their language skills, their overall academic performance improved as well. The teachers noted an increase in the students' verbal communication, self confidence, participation and progress in reading and writing when compared to a control group.

Stepping up educational support

Relying on funding from outside sources, the program is currently limited in its reach, says Prof. Kishon-Rabin. This is an issue that

schools all over the world face as well. Many schools are not even allocated speech therapy hours, and those that do have such courses are extremely limited in their scope.

School boards should make more of an effort to meet the language needs of their multicultural populations, she suggests. Some positive steps would include the hiring of full time clinicians, the provision of better training for teachers on [language development](#), and the incorporation of this content into the normal curriculum. Such programs also help train the next generation of [clinicians](#), who receive hands-on experience. The Tel Aviv University [students](#) who have volunteered experience high satisfaction from the help they provide, reports Prof. Kishon-Rabin. "It's a win-win situation," she observes.

Currently, the program is going full steam ahead into the next academic year, and Prof. Kishon-Rabin hopes that the necessary funding will follow. She is also pioneering another community project set to start in the fall which will encourage greater involvement from teachers, parents, and other community members. "The more the parents are involved, the better the outcome of therapy with the children will be," she says.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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