

Position Paper

Free Early Childhood Education: Challenges and Policy Alternatives

Carmel Blank and Sarit Silverman

This research was generously supported by the Beracha Foundation,
the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and Yad Hanadiv

Taub Center Early Childhood Research Series

Research Paper No. 11, Jerusalem, January 2023

Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel

The Taub Center was established in 1982 under the leadership and vision of Herbert M. Singer, Henry Taub, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The Center is funded by a permanent endowment created by the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, the Herbert M. and Nell Singer Foundation, Jane and John Colman, the Kolker-Saxon-Hallock Family Foundation, the Milton A. and Roslyn Z. Wolf Family Foundation, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

This paper, like all Center publications, represents the views of its authors only, and they alone are responsible for its contents. Nothing stated in this paper creates an obligation on the part of the Center, its Board of Directors, its employees, other affiliated persons, or those who support its activities.

Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality

The Taub Center's *Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality* is tasked with examining the effects of the young child's environment on future achievements and disseminating the latest research on this subject. The Initiative's goal is to assist in the advancement of effective policy to improve the environmental conditions of children in Israel during their early years of life, in order to improve their outcomes and reduce disparities due to socioeconomic background. The researchers involved in this initiative draft up-to-date research reports, literature surveys, position papers, and policy papers. As part of its effort to disseminate the latest available knowledge, the Initiative holds an academic seminar to provide a multidisciplinary basis — both theoretical and empirical — for the investigation of early childhood. The activity of the Initiative is guided by an International Advisory Council consisting of leading academics, policy makers and members of civil society organizations who are committed to the advancement and implementation of effective policy in the area of early childhood in Israel. The activities of the Initiative are supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Beracha Foundation, and Yad Hanadiv.

The Initiative is headed by Prof. Yossi Shavit, Principal Researcher, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel; Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University.

Research staff: Dr. Carmel Blank, Liora Bowers, Dr. Yael Navon, Dana Shay, Dr. Sarit Silverman.

Advisory Council: Prof. Esti Adi-Japha, Daniella Ben-Attar, Efrat Degani-Toperoff, Prof. Isaac Friedman, Prof. John Gal, Dr. Shoshi Goldberg, Prof. Reuven Gronau, Sima Hadad, Dr. Tzipi Horowitz-Kraus, Fatma Kassem, Orit Levin, Varda Malka, Michal Mankas, Dr. Tali Yariv Mishal, Dr. Naomi Moreno, Prof. Frank Oberklaid, Ehud (Udi) Prawer, Prof. Sigal Sadetsky, Prof. Avi Sagi-Schwartz, Prof. Manual Trajtenberg, Dr. Maya Yaari.

Free Early Childhood Education: Challenges and Policy Alternatives

Carmel Blank and Sarit Silverman

Early childhood is the most formative period in a person's life. It is a period of accelerated cognitive, emotional, and social development that creates the foundation of these skills for the entire life course. There is a consensus among economists, and social scientists in general, that investment in early childhood is the most effective way to reduce social gaps and remove children from the vicious cycle of poverty, two processes that, in turn, will contribute to economic growth (Heckman, 2006; 2008). In recent weeks, there has been increasing discussion of expanding free education in Israel to include young children under the age of three, intending to alleviate the economic burden on young parents. The *Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality* research team feels that even if there is value in providing free public education from a very young age, this policy is liable to have serious negative effects if the proper infrastructure is not in place to deliver high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Currently, increased demand on the early childhood education system — both the public system for 3–6-year-olds and the private and (supervised) public system for young children from birth to age 3 — will likely lead to low-quality care in the best case and the collapse of the daycare system in the worst case. This is due to the acute manpower shortage, which has led to the employment of staff who are for the most part untrained, and the lack of suitable facilities, particularly those that meet safety regulations. We will present the challenges in the current situation and the proposal to broaden the Free Education for Young Children Law. We then suggest several policy alternatives.

* Dr. Carmel Blank, Senior Researcher, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel; lecturer, Behavior Science Department, Ruppin Academic Center. Dr. Sarit Silverman, Senior Researcher, Taub Center.

The authors wish to thank the participants in the Taub Center Seminar on Early Childhood Development whose comments and recommendations contributed to this work: Ms. Cynthia Cohen, Ms. Ola Fahraldin, Prof. Dorit Aram, Ms. Rickie Rozmarin, Ms. Shlomit Lamdan, Ms. Sima Shahino, and Dr. Naomi Moreno. The final version of this paper and its contents are the sole responsibility of its authors.

The challenges

The manpower shortage

Currently, there is an acute shortage of manpower in the daycare system for ages birth to 3, in both the private and public daycare centers (which are operated by WIZO, Naamat, and other organizations). Given the high fertility rate in Israel, the demand for educational frameworks is expected to continue to rise and this shortage is not expected to improve in the near future. Providing free education to three additional cohorts without a significant increase in the supply of workers will further increase demand and will only serve to exacerbate the current situation. Even if at first glance the system appears to be functioning well, there are many daycare centers for ages birth to 3 that are understaffed or are closing part of the week or permanently closing their doors. This “trickle” is accumulating into a downpour and within a few months could become a flood — something that should be avoided. The shortage of manpower has led to a situation in which the educational level of daycare staff is low relative to other countries (Vaknin, 2020) and it is difficult to find staff with the appropriate training or any training at all. The Ministry of Education is providing training programs for ECEC staff, which is a welcome first step, but it is insufficient to solve the current manpower shortage, even without expanding universal ECEC.

The limited supply of facilities that meet the regulations

There is a shortage of daycare facilities in many local authorities. This is especially the case following the adoption of regulations that apply to daycare centers for very young children, which established much-needed standards of safety and ventilation. The funds allocated to daycare centers are earmarked for the building of classrooms; however, building new classrooms in every location is not viable. The shortage in manpower and appropriate structures, alongside the high natural rate of population growth in Israel, has led to a situation in which the supply of daycare centers falls far short of demand. The dismal result is crowded ECEC frameworks with a high ratio of children to staff, one that is below the standards in most developed countries (Vaknin, 2020).

Research findings from other countries show that high-quality ECEC frameworks contribute to a child’s welfare in many ways, including, higher academic achievement later on in school (Vaknin, 2020). On the other hand, the existing research findings for Israel indicate that entry into the education

system before the age of three does not make a statistically significant contribution to academic achievement, which is perhaps due to the current low quality of those frameworks (Vaknin & Shavit, 2021; Zontag et al., 2020). In contrast, studies carried out by the Taub Center among children in Israel from age three and over have found a positive link between the time spent in early childhood education and future academic achievement. This is apparently due to the attendance of young children over age three in frameworks that meet pedagogical and other standards of education and care.

A variety of ideas are currently being discussed for reducing the heavy financial burden on parents of children up to the age of three including the use of vouchers or a more modest expansion of free education from age two. The use of vouchers, whether for the entire population or according to a means or employment test, will lead to greater demand, which as mentioned is already high. Given the lack of immediate solutions to the current shortage of manpower, low quality, and the lack of suitable facilities, the distribution of vouchers is liable to increase crowding in existing daycare centers and further reduce the quality of ECEC. It is important to mention that the daycare centers for young children up to age three are, for the most part, private and until recently operated without government supervision. Under these conditions, a deficit developed in the number of daycare centers and in particular high-quality ones, even in areas of high demand where parents pay thousands of shekels a month. Therefore, we believe that providing parents with the resources and incentives (which is what happens today, through public daycare subsidies) will not solve the problem and will even come at the expense of the much-needed investment in the system.

Regarding the expansion of free education to include two-year-olds, we believe that, at this time, and without any additional steps, even a partial expansion is likely to be challenging and will create new problems rather than solve existing ones. At the age of two, most children are not yet toilet trained, their language skills are not always sufficiently developed, and they have immature self-regulation. The addition of children at such a critical age to the public education system, which is based on insufficient manpower with less than optimal training, may harm the developmental processes of these children. On a national level, the damage to human capital and economic growth may be larger than the expected benefit from encouraging parents to enter the labor force at this stage in their child's development, despite the clear advantage in efforts to encourage parents to participate in the labor force.

Given the problems in Israel's early childhood education system, we recommend before expanding the Free Education Law to young children under age three, policymakers should focus on improving the quality of early childhood education and building a stable infrastructure to provide the basis for a future gradual and coordinated extension to younger age cohorts. The process of promoting these measures has already started in the form of the Law for Supervision of Daycare Centers for Young Children. This is welcome legislation; however, it was launched with an insufficient budget and as a result has led to less than satisfactory outcomes such as the closure of many private frameworks due to their increased operating costs. This needs to be addressed and the process should continue based on sufficient funding:

- Attention should primarily be focused on the recruitment of manpower and the building of classrooms. Following this, there should be an improvement in conditions of employment and staff training. Such efforts will raise the prestige of the profession and will make it possible to attract high-quality manpower on a larger scale, which will create the conditions to meet the growing demand.
- In parallel, it is recommended that, on the institutional level, the various authorities dealing with ECEC be brought under a single authority and that the supervised frameworks be made accessible to all segments of the population. This can be done in cooperation with the local authorities, which will make it possible for the State to provide supervision and support while creating the opportunity for different population sectors to maintain their cultural identity within the educational framework.

The cost of these recommendations should be included in the budget, which will ensure that the quality of education — and not just its associated costs — will be improved. It is important to remember that investment in ECEC has potential benefits: personal benefits to the individual; and social and economic benefits that will manifest in future economic growth. The costs of such policy measures should be evaluated against the benefit they will produce — both in the short and long terms.

Policy alternatives

Based on our familiarity with the system and consultation with numerous early childhood professionals, both in academia and in the field, the following are alternatives that will help to resolve the current issues:

Immediate alternatives

Some of these policy measures are aimed at the initial stabilization of the system and are not a substitute for wise long-term planning.

Increasing the supply of manpower and improving its quality

1. *Increasing the supply of manpower* utilizing the “preferential work” system for recently discharged soldiers to apply to jobs in the ECEC system; integrating teacher-soldiers in the daycare system; and creating early childhood curricula in the ulpanot. These measures are short-term solutions. With the expected rise in professional prestige, they may no longer be necessary and it will be possible to focus on the recruitment of skilled manpower for the long term.
2. *Expansion of training programs* for caregivers within teacher colleges.
3. A decision to provide *retention bonus* from the State or the municipality to workers in a daycare center for young children from birth to age 3.
4. Increasing public investment in *on-the-job training of caregivers* (in both the supervised and unsupervised frameworks):
 - *Changing the method for compensating pedagogical instructors.* Currently, payment is according to work hours. The small number of work hours allocated to each daycare center instructor creates a huge burden of dozens of daycare centers on each instructor, a situation that makes it difficult for them to provide effective support. It is important to shift to a fair hourly rate of payment, on a scale that is based on the instructor’s education and experience. This can also improve the instructors career path.
 - *Increasing the number of training hours* per daycare center and capping the number of daycare centers each pedagogical instructor is responsible for.
 - *Higher subsidies of training hours* by the Ministry of Education (which will finance part of the cost, and to which the daycare center will add its contribution, to reach more reasonable wages and to create a commitment on the part of the daycare center).

Improving the conditions of the educational and caregiving staff

1. *Significantly raising the salaries of the staff* to attract higher-quality manpower.
2. *Creating a separation between education and operations.* It is worthwhile removing the responsibility for maintenance (cleaning, garbage removal, etc.) from the caregiving staff to reduce the burden of non-professional work on them. This can be accomplished by means of an external cleaning company (similar to the school system).
3. *Raising the prestige of the profession and improving the public status of the educational and caregiving staff.* Until the issue of wages is dealt with and there is an increase in demand that will make it possible to raise the job requirements, it will be worthwhile to focus on raising the prestige of the profession. This can be done by media campaigns to strengthen the image of the staff in the eyes of the public. Another example is Appreciation Week in the local authorities for early childhood educators and caregivers.
4. *Closing daycare centers on Fridays* or reducing the hours on Fridays until the supply of appropriate manpower is increased (which is what happens in any case in many daycare centers as a result of the difficulty in finding staff). The mandatory across-the-board closing of all daycare centers will improve work conditions in the daycare centers to a significant extent and will provide greater flexibility in determining work days.
5. *Provision of benefits to daycare staff.* It is recommended that the staff be provided with discounts at municipal facilities (libraries, swimming pools, etc.) and that they be given free parking spaces near the daycare center (currently, some staff in the Center pay up to NIS 1,000 per month for parking).

Improving the institutional and bureaucratic processes and consolidation of responsibility for ECEC On the State level

1. *National level*
 - *Concentrate responsibility for ECEC (for ages birth–3) under a single roof,* as is the case of ages 3–6. Currently, subsidy determination and registration for certified daycare centers are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Economy; children with special needs are the responsibility of the Welfare Ministry; and pedagogy is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. It is important to consolidate

responsibility for all of these areas within one agency which will deal with all aspects of ECEC (apart from the placement of young children at-risk).

- *Balancing between the desire for a universal umbrella and embracing cultural uniqueness.* The implementation of supervisory regulations for daycare centers for young children created uniform standards that are not suited to every population group making it difficult for some daycare centers to adopt the regulations (for example, the quantity and content of children's books in Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) daycare centers, the ratio of staff to children in kibbutz education, etc.). The room to maneuver in setting standards for density and manpower, as well as curricula and on-the-job training, will make it possible to put additional daycare centers under a single supervisory umbrella.

2. Local authority level

- *Support and guidance for the local authorities from the Ministry of Education.* The local authority is familiar with the needs and challenges of its residents and with the right tools it can provide them with the optimal solutions. Primarily local authorities with large populations of lower socioeconomic status residents are in the process of creating ECEC systems, with the goal of providing them with the ability to manage the various aspects of the system independently. This guidance will include, directives on how to recruit administrators for the ECEC system and how to create a support system for the staff on the local level; assistance in formulating structured curricula; and organization of informational conferences.
- *Staff creation for children from birth to age 6 in the local authorities* (rather than separating between children from birth to age 3 and those ages 3 to 6). This will make it possible to eliminate administrative positions and will prevent fragmentation. It will also facilitate better use of knowledge and resources. Since the needs of this wide range of ages differ, the staff should include experts on a variety of ages.
- Recruitment of the local authorities to *systematically gather data and map the frameworks* in their jurisdiction, based on positive incentives, whether economic or otherwise, with the goal of encouraging the cooperation of daycare center owners. Such a mapping can provide a database for creating public infrastructure that fits the needs of children and parents in each local authority.

Making daycare centers more accessible

1. *More flexible criteria for subsidies to supervised daycare centers* are better suited to a variety of populations. For example, rescinding the conditioning for subsidies on the mother's full-time employment (which acts primarily as a barrier in Arab society) and allowing mothers that work part-time to qualify.
2. *Modifying the criteria for building daycare centers* according to the characteristics of the local population:
 - Many local authorities have received budgets for building daycare centers but have been unable to build them. Underutilization is particularly characteristic of Arab local authorities. To increase utilization of the available budget, private and non-profit organizations should be allowed to compete to build daycare centers.
 - Local authorities should be allowed to utilize the budget allocated to them not only for building new daycare centers but also for refurbishment of existing structures, according to their needs. Building a large number of small daycare centers in neighborhoods will increase access for the local population (which is primarily relevant in the Arab and Haredi sectors).

Short- and mid-term alternatives

The implementation of these alternatives may be more complicated but they are nonetheless essential to improving the system and strengthening it in the long term.

Upgrading of manpower and their conditions of employment

1. *Adoption of a mechanism for selecting caregivers* to receive on-the-job training programs, with the goal of minimizing dropout rates.
2. *Conditioning compensation* on completion of on-the-job training (or part of one) and a minimum period of employment in the ECEC system (on the assumption that the demand for on-the-job training exceeds its supply).
3. *Providing instructional and consultation hours also to preschool teachers and staff in preschool and kindergarten for 3–6-year-olds*, whose training in many cases consists of an academic degree obtained 20 years ago. Currently, there is no program of on-the-job training for preschool and kindergarten teachers for these age groups, except in the case of acute problems.

4. *Professional seminars* for educational and caregiving staff (ages birth to 6).
5. *Creation of employment prospects*. Creating motivation among the staff by means of, for example, compensation for professional on-the-job training, managerial training for suitable candidates, and other programs currently available to preschool and kindergarten teachers (ages 3–6).

Improving the institutional and bureaucratic environment and consolidating the responsibility for ECEC

1. *Periodic rethinking about the staff conditions* determined by the State for supervised daycare centers, such as, for example, the size of a framework and the staff-to-child ratio, to gradually raise standards.

Improved access to daycare centers

1. *Building a model of subsidies that will increase flexibility* in accepting children into frameworks on a part-time basis and at a lower cost to the parents (such as half-days or only on certain days of the week). Such a change will also make it possible for mothers who work part-time to place their children in an ECEC framework. This will encourage employment on the one hand and the usage of supervised frameworks on the other (relevant primarily in Arab society).
2. *Registration for certified daycare centers (for young children from birth to age 3) according to registration districts*, with priority given to children in the town or area in which the framework is located. Currently, a child from a different town or neighborhood can be accepted to a daycare center at the expense of a local child since registration with the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment is dependent only on the family's socioeconomic status. This setup has several advantages:
 - Provide the possibility to pre-register a child (before their birth) in a daycare center within the parent's area of residence, in contrast to the situation today in which daycare centers are populated by many children from different towns or neighborhoods and one parent may have to stay at home as a caregiver until a place becomes open in a closer daycare center.
 - Encourage daycare centers to become certified and supervised. Currently, if a daycare center becomes certified and the parents in it are eligible for subsidies, the Ministry of the Economy can place non-local children there at the expense of local ones. This means that daycare centers in certain areas, such as rural regions, forego subsidies they would otherwise be eligible for to give preference to local children.

Lengthening maternity and parental leave with full or partial payment

Since free education from birth essentially starts from the end of maternity leave, it is worthwhile considering the length of maternity leave. The fertility and employment rates among mothers of young children in Israel are relatively high compared to other developed countries (OECD, 2020; 2022a; Vaknin, 2020), while Israel's paid maternity leave is among the shortest in the OECD and the EU (even though in Israel a parent on leave is eligible for full payment while in countries with a longer period the payment is only partial) (OECD, 2022b; Vaknin, 2020). This combination leads to greater demand for ECEC facilities at a very early stage in the child's life. Therefore, in addition to the aforementioned short-and intermediate-term recommendations, it is worth considering required parental leave for men and lengthening the period of paid maternity leave. The latter can involve partial payment, with varying coverage during the period and employment protection. These solutions can shorten the period in which parents feel forced to return to the labor force and pay for expensive educational private frameworks for their children.

Summary

Making ECEC free without careful planning, a significant budget increase, and comprehensive, long-term solutions for the issues addressed here is liable to send the system into a tailspin and undermine what has already been accomplished and what is expected to be accomplished in the near future. Furthermore, workers will leave this sector; daycare centers will close when they become unprofitable; and the quality of the education provided will decline even further. Therefore, in our opinion, the strengthening of existing physical and human infrastructure in the ECEC system should continue and once the system has stabilized, it will be possible to discuss the expansion of public education to a younger age group, based on research and observations from the experience in other countries. As already stated, this is a welcome initiative but for it to succeed, appropriate groundwork must be done first.

References

- Heckman, J. J. (2006). *Investing in disadvantaged young children is an economically efficient policy*. Committee for Economic Development.
- Heckman, J. J. (2008). *Schools, skills, and synapses*. *Economic Inquiry*, 46(3), 289–324.
- OECD (2020). *Maternal employment rates*.
- OECD (2022a). *Fertility rates*.
- OECD (2022b). *Parental leave systems*.
- Vaknin, D. (2020). *Early childhood education and care in Israel compared to the OECD: Enrollment rates, employment rates of mothers, quality indices, and future achievement*. Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel.
- Vaknin, H., & Shavit, Y. (2021). *Preschool attendance through age 3 and its impact on academic achievement in Grade 4*. Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel.
- Zontag, N., Navon, Y., Vaknin, D., Bowers, L., Blank, C., & Shavit, Y. (2020). *Educational frameworks for young children and academic achievement in Israel*. Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel.