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DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR

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In the professional literature regarding the various aspects of the nature on counseling, two terms that define the work of the school counselor stand out in particular: guidance and counseling (Kligman, 1990). The role of the educational counselor could be defined as a unique individual contact which purpose is to promote change and growth in three aspects: personal development, social adjustment and professional development. By this definition, counseling is perceived as a dynamic process characterized by the change in the consultee (Kligman, 1990). Educational counseling is meant to advance the emotional, cognitive and social development of the pupil population in the education system, and to lead the construction of an environment that allows for mental well-being for those growing in it, Educational counseling is aimed to assist the student as an individual, and to the school as a social-organizational system, to reach maximum functionality and to best extract their capabilities from emotional well-being in a supportive and accepting environment (Shefi, Psychological Counseling Service (Shefi) policy issue: Work as a Consultant in early childhood, 2002). The counselor is the system's mental well-being go-to man. His availability inside the school faculty allows him to assist both the individual and the environment, to take the best actions whilst rapidly responding to the student, the faculty and the parents. His location as a faculty member enables him to simultaneously see various, and sometimes opposite, needs of all the target audiences, and to hold a balanced perspective on regulation, to arbitrate and mediate opposite stances. The counselor is a liaison with a systematic viewpoint from inside the school and between the school and the community. His professional purpose regards the entire student population whilst taking into account their various needs and the obligated response these variation dictate.¹

Key words: educational counseling, early childhood counseling

Historical background

Parsons offered the momentum for school guidance programs. In his book "Choosing a vocation" he describes the counseling as a three stages pro-

¹ Shefi, *Standards for professional practice in educational counseling*, 2009.

cess: (1) understanding the skills and tendencies of the consultee; (2) acknowledging and understanding the environment, what it offers professionally and the possibility to succeed in these professions; and (3) adapting the qualifications of the consultee to the demands of the environment. Parsons changed the definition from school guidance to *professional guidance*- which purpose is to assist the consultee to choose a profession, and to help prepare him for this profession so he could find work and develop a successful career in this chosen profession. In contrary to his predecessors, Parsons saw the counseling process as a dynamic learning process, rather than just handing off advice.

Another influential researcher who had tremendous impact on the field is Nash, who organized school counseling program that was incorporated in the school curriculum. This class was offered to students who were unsure in regards of choosing a school major, or in future professional plans. This program set itself with five goals: (1) to gather systematically information about the students; (2) professional use of the student profile card; (3) to showcase topics of professional career; (4) to gather information about professions and the possibilities of success they hold; and (5) to adapt school lessons to the students professional plans.²

In 1962 in Israel, it was decided to qualify a teacher-counselor who would dedicate half of his time to teaching and the other half to counseling. The teacher-counselor's roles are: (1) to gather information about the student; (2) to gather professional information and provide guidance as to further the students education in finding a job; (3) helping the teacher to understand the student's difficulties and (4) examinations usage. At first, the main role of the counselor was to provide seventh and eighth graders with professional guidance. Later on it was decided that counselors with a two-year seniority would help students in solving personal problems regarding school. Another aspect that arose regarded the counselor's interaction with teachers. Treating the individual and providing teachers with guidance was emphasized, whilst less emphasis was placed on the administrative aspect. In addition, the counselor's work spread out to elementary schools as well as to high school. In intermediate school the emphasis was on observation, consultancy and guidance in revealing the student's talent. Also, he would aid teachers in dealing with problematic students, both emotionally and academically. The counselor will also have contacts with psychological and medical factors when those are required. Most educational counselors work

² A. Kligman, *Psychological counseling principles, approaches, and methods of intervention*, Tel Aviv 1990.

for the ministry of education, operating under "Psychological Counseling Service," which provides the counselors with supervision and guidance from expert counselors and specialists in the field. The psychologist's role is to administer tests for struggling students, determine their IQ level and educational limitations, whilst the counselor's work is with the normal population. As psychology developed, the school psychologist was granted with more responsibilities, such as emotional difficulties diagnosis and therapy treatment. Rogers approach has been added to evolving counselors' treatment methods. The drawbacks of the psychological approach in schools are: (1) the stigma that comes with seeing a psychologist caused less families and children to come to therapy; (2) valuable professional time was spent with only few children and (3) the approach worked better with intelligent and verbal children. The teacher-counselor approach was also insufficient: (1) teachers were unwilling to provide a service that was perceived as more beneficial to themselves than to problematic students and (2) the intensification of the approach viewing the teacher as seeing to the mental well-being of the student, rather than purely academic concern. The field of educational therapy transitioned from treating the individual to treating a group. The focal point of therapy changed focus from belonging to the counselor's room to the classroom, whilst being both directly and indirectly involved in the educational process.³

The efficiency of the individual counseling approach has been disputed in the last few years. The key arguments regarding this are: (1) the difficulty to solve behavioral and adjustment problems rapidly. Personal treatment is complex and time consuming, therefore the counselor can only handle a small number of children at a time; (2) a counselor mostly working with individuals cannot fulfill the classical role of a group counselor; (3) in modern society, there is a growth in the number of people requesting professional help and few people who can provide it; (4) the stigma on counseling can prevent people from seeking it; and (5) the counselor influenced by teacher's perspective point view, rather than focus on personal patient treatment. There is, another working model - "**Counseling Model**," according to which the teacher should be both an educator and perform counseling functions that were once the responsibility of the counselor. This approach is consistent with modern counseling principles.

Basic premises in educational counseling: mental well-being is crucial for the proper functioning of a student in the educational system. The professional objective of the counselor aims to improve mental well-being of

³ Ibidem.

every student, as well as best developing the individual and the organization. The individual is part of a system, and therefore individual interventions is systematic by nature. The role of the counselor is to drive processes that help achieving educational goals via their translation into applicable operations. Hence, the role of the counselor requires him to be proactive and initiative.⁴

Learning is a fundamental task for the development of the individual in the system, from which the counselor's positions and actions are derived. The educational counselor helps with an ongoing school endeavor optimization by continuous questioning and evaluation of the satisfaction and dissatisfaction origins in the organization. The perception of the educational counselor's work aims at teamwork and cross-professional partnerships.

Highlights of educational counselor work:

- The growing importance of involvement in fostering a positive school climate while promoting data-based interventions.

- In conducted developmental programs at schools, there is an emphasis on developing strength and an educated acknowledgement of children at risk.

- Focusing on the educational staff and attentional investment in perfecting teacher's skills in promoting a meaningful dialogue between students and adults in their surroundings.

- A trend of combining special-needs students in the regular system, and changes in aiding students with learning disabilities require the counselors to focus on learning process and social and emotional advancement of these students.

All of these trends require the counselor to work more on consultation processes, assessment and teamwork. Recognition of the inherent capabilities in human being and the organization and aimed to support these capabilities, as a way to promote development. Optimized promotion is related to strengthening coping skills of the individual and the organization and development resilience of the person and organization in a developmental sequence. Approaching the student while being alert and sensitive to his familial context, i.e. professionally understanding and recognizing the student's parents as the significant adult figures in his life. This dictates an ongoing communication with the parents as individuals and as a substantial group in the school's surrounding. Hence, the counselor shall work to bring the educational staff to see parents as meaningful partners. In order to better the educational staff's abilities and positions when working with individuals

⁴ Shefi, *Standards for professional practice*.

and with the class as a group, counselors work in a teamwork-oriented manner. Along with this teamwork-orientation, the counselor also harnesses partners for the purpose of advancing students while incorporating a multi-professional point of view. The fundamental values that conceptualize this role include non-selective stands towards populations with different needs, and a multi-cultural and egalitarian perspective. The professional concepts of counseling rely on a value system enshrined by professional ethics, according to which the consultee's best interest and proper development are central targets. The counselor often finds himself in a dilemma because of dual loyalties, and so there is a rule of thumb that the student is always preferred and regarded as the main customer.

Educational counseling's fields of practice: Advancing the emotional, cognitive and social development of the student population, and leading the construction of an environment which enables mental well-being. Promoting an optimal climate and preventing violence in school, teaching life skills, preventing use and abuse of drugs, alcohol and tobacco, dealing with gender issues and families, preventing child abuse and sexual assaults, managing emergencies and stressful situations, working with at-risk children and students with learning disabilities. On top of these responsibilities, there are also organizational scopes under the counselor's responsibility:⁵

- **Development:** maturity and growth potential optimization, age development assignments, developmental sequence, chances optimization at the starting point, special needs, and multicultural variance.

- **Mental well-being:** self-esteem enhancement, strengths reinforcement, socio-emotional learning, research and meaningful creativity, satisfying needs, and creating support systems.

- **Systemic view:** Optimal education climate, diagnostics and intervention, substance and process, teamwork, affinities of individuals and environment, communication, assessment and feedback, cooperation with educational counselor's role complementary staff.

- **Safety net:** prevention programs, risk situations, dealing with crisis and emergency, therapeutic intervention, meaningful figures, crisis.

Early Childhood Educational Consulting

The inclusion of counselors in early childhood developed gradually over the course of several years. In light of the allocation of consulting hours for

⁵ Ibidem.

kindergarteners in early 2001, a definition of these counselors practice fields was required, along with establishing a cooperation with the psychological services. The kindergarten's organizational structure is substantially different than that of a school. This structure requires a precise definition of the customers and of the type of services provided to them, in order to prevent conflicts when providing professional services. The working premise is that the kindergarten teacher is not be expected to regulate this issue. The professionals standing at her disposal are required to show professional responsibility and to implement the guidelines derived from the policy.⁶

Historical Overview in Israel

For the past 15 years or so, a slow and limited process for integrating educational counselors in working with kindergarteners. This began with initiatives from kindergartens superintends who provided an orientation day for counselors, and who were aided by them mainly for working in front of groups of kindergarten teachers, and for individualistic consultant with them. Throughout these years, the department of kindergarten education appointed a counselor who specialized in early childhood as the coordinator of the field within the department. From this point on, the department of kindergarten education funded the guidance and supervision for counselors. An enrichment program was established and they were provided with systematic guidance. There were also guided workshops, clarifying the professional orientation of early childhood counseling. By the end of the school year in 2001 the group consisted of 21 counselors, operating through the initiative of the department of kindergarten education.⁷

The level of interest shown by the administration of the department of kindergarten education in early childhood counselors, and the repeated requests from its behalf to the department's management, generated in September 2001 a decision from the ministry of education to apply educational counseling on kindergarteners. This decision manifest in allocating 500 standard hours for hiring counselors for kindergarteners. The group of the 21 counselors was coordinated, as previously stated, by a counselor that served as the head of the field in the department of kindergarten education. From the point of view of Psychological Counseling Service this was an unusual situation compared to the customary supervision protocols regarding educational counselors for other age levels in the department. While everything

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ministry of Education, *Second assistant reform, leading kindergarten teachers. Guide to supervisor Department Preschool*, 2015.

regarding school counseling, the professional staff and mental health programs, are supervised by Psychological Counseling Service department, the professional group of kindergarten counseling is subject to a department of early childhood. This situation required change and adjustment to supervision protocols customary to the ministry of education, which required allocating the 500 hours to Psychological Counseling Service in order to run a counseling system for kindergarteners. In this context began a dialogue and agreements were drafted between the head of the field of kindergarten counseling in Psychological Counseling Service and the representatives of the guidance division in the department of kindergarten education. Balanced structures, subordinations and role definitions were established. Counselor's placements and requirements were finalized. The educational counselor employed in kindergartens is subject to kindergarten supervisor regarding administrative and pedagogic issues and to the senior counselor regarding professional matters. The systemic structure of the counseling infrastructure requires coordinating and guidance in regional distribution. Therefore, seven coordinators for kindergartener's counselors were appointed in the different districts, whose job is to hold regular meetings with the counselors of their district in order to provide them with guidance and to formulate their professional work. They are also in charge of keeping regular contact with senior counselors and coordination supervisors (district coordinator supervisors of kindergartens) in each district. District supervisors are subject to the division of counseling in the department of kindergarten education in administrative and pedagogic matters, and to Psychological Counseling Service in professional matters.⁸

Why Did the Development of Counseling Services for Kindergarteners in Israel Began?

Research and publication in professional literature emphasized the centrality of early childhood in human development. This awakening was given incentive from professionals of various fields such as educators, legislators, state leaders, business men, factors in the community and government and of course, researchers from various disciplines, led by neuroscientists. This development raised voices demanding to prioritize kindergarten education. Attention and awareness to early childhood and its importance was often used by political factors, yet unfortunately, this educational sphere wasn't always granted with proper resources. These processes characterized

⁸ Shefi, *Psychological Counseling Service (Shefi) policy issue: Work as a Consultant in early childhood*, 2002.

government institutions and educational authorities worldwide, and in Israel. In this manner, allocating resources to educational counseling in educational systems in Israel represents a breakthrough. This includes a realistic vision of system requirements and focusing attention and resources in the kindergarten sphere. These moves represent an understanding of the way this service could benefit educational processes and the mental well-being of children and of the adults in their surroundings.⁹

System Requirements - the Kindergarten Teacher as a Meaningful Adult

The kindergarten teacher runs an educational institute, she holds a complex role and should integrate knowledge in developmental and educational theories along with administrative technical organizational knowledge, including resource mobilization, structural responsibility etc.¹⁰ The kindergarten teacher is the formal authority, in and out of the kindergarten. She's responsible for interactions with the educational staff, the local authorities, the supervisor and the parents. It is her responsibility to establish work procedures, fundraising and creating an annual work program. Over the years, the role of the kindergarten teacher was added with more responsibilities, and pedagogic and organizational demands, making her work more difficult and that might compromise her professional self-esteem. She's expected to prevent social tensions, solve personal problems, guide and direct parents and to create beneficial interactions with various factors. The kindergarten teacher's ability to cope with many tasks is related to, amongst other things, the quality of her own mental well-being and to the degree by which her needs are met at work.¹¹ Kindergarten teachers often feel isolated in their work, with no one to consult with during work hours. They carry the responsibility and burden solely. Many kindergarten teachers report feelings of loneliness, mental and physical overload at work, lack of support, lack of knowledge and managerial skills and difficulties with communication and resources. The professional literature teaches us that the real and internal difficulties the kindergarten teacher experiences at work might cause her to feel a lack of self-efficacy, which is linked to her belief in her own capability to fulfill her job professionally, which is crucial to the quality of her educational and organizational work.¹² The kindergarten teacher's level of self-

⁹ E. Dashevsky, *Early Childhood Educational Consulting*, Echo Garden, 2006.

¹⁰ N.O. Saracho, B. Spodek, *Professional and the preparation of early childhood education practitioners*, Early child development and care, 2003.

¹¹ Z. Oshrat, *Stress and exhaustion in kindergarten*, in: S. Kalman, A. Peleg, Tel Aviv 2000.

¹² Ibidem.

awareness to her professional capability enhances her sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and confidence, and empowers the sense of connection and belongingness she feels towards the institution. One of the goals of professional accompanying is developing the kindergarten teacher's reflective ability, which is an important instrument that advances processes of personal and professional growth and mental well-being, thus enhancing her efficiency and her ability to manage dilemmas and difficulties in a more educated manner. On the other hand, reflection also promotes a critical perspective in regards to her position and so it might raise feelings of frustration and helplessness in face of the system, on the municipal level and of the treatment from the ministry of education and so on. Kindergarten teachers speak on loneliness, lack of support and insecurities, while the education system expects them to be qualified for running the kindergarten and have managerial skills for running a staff and managing other factors from the community. She's expected to hold professional and pedagogical knowledge. Kindergarten teacher's training, as good as it might be, is still insufficient to prepare kindergartens to the workload and to the demands of the profession. The education system is supposed to provide them with guidance that will cultivate their personal and professional skills, and to help them to increase a sense of self-efficacy by offering them resources and answering their needs at work. Findings show that kindergarten teachers have no managerial skills, and no experience in managing teams or human resources. Kindergarten supervisor is responsible for part of this escort, guidance and support. The preschool supervisor is responsible for more than a hundred kindergarten teachers, which limits her to more supervision work than guiding work. The training is done by professional instructors in that field of knowledge and in recent years one educational counselor was assigned to each kindergarten teacher.¹³ The supervisor works to implement the policy of the ministry of education, to promote initiatives and relevant subjects, and her job also requires her to assess and fill in kindergarten teacher's records.¹⁴

The increasing needs of kindergarten education shaped the various aspects of the role of the educational counselor for kindergarteners, with special emphases on the preventive, consolatory and guiding aspects. Researchers of the field believe that the educational environment should be enhanced by providing consult to the adults in the child's life. The educational

¹³ R. Ganz Aloni, *The world of kindergarten*, [in:] *Thesis for Master's Degree in the Humanities*, Tel Aviv 2003.

¹⁴ R. Amir, *You Should Know*, [in:] *Kindergarten Management Manual*, Jerusalem 1997.

counselor's role is of great importance at the level of systemic work, in consulting to the meaningful adults in the child's life, such as the parents and kindergarten teacher. Thus, developing learning communities of kindergarten-staff with the participation of educational counselors could provide significant answers, especially to the kindergarten teacher's needs. The lack of a counselor who works in this area in kindergartens damages greatly the optimal educational climate in kindergartens. One of the crucial elements that harm this optimal climate, even in the presence of a counselor, is the absence of a supporting infrastructure to empower and escort the counselor.

The Educational Counselor in the Kindergartens as Part of a Supporting Infrastructure

The characteristics of the kindergarten teacher's work, the demands of her job and the difficulties she faces and deals with daily alone, which is what the educational counselor answers for. From the field, a dire need for support and assistance arises. Yet, there it remains unclear as to what the role of the educational counselor is when working with kindergarteners. This is a result of kindergarten teachers having only little experience working with counselors, which results from the very limited number of hours the counselors are hired for. These counselors sometimes work with over a hundred kindergartens with only ten working hours per week. This may cause situations where counselors don't meet, or even know many of the kindergarten teachers they are assigned to work with. In turn, these teachers do not reach out for the help from educational counseling, which they view as a relatively new field with uncertainty regarding the aspects of the counselor's role, and also because of them being unavailable towards the teachers.

Educational counseling sees the educational endeavor in kindergartens in the context of systemic processes, of educational factors working in it and of the power balance between them. The unique contribution that educational counseling brings to the kindergarten system relies on the core concept of the importance of developing *אקלים מיטבי*, formulating a safe and enabling environment that summons experimenting in social, emotional and intellectual aspects. This concept focuses the counselor's work around three main focal points:

- Empowerment – the counselor operates group and individualistic consultation and guidance as a means for dealing with dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions in the kindergarten teacher's role. The counselor enables the teacher's empowerment by expanding her observational tools, enriching her

professional language, expanding her conceptual and contextual emotional world, which working with children encompasses. Group meetings include peer-learning through reflective inquiry, analyzing events from the kindergarten and processing experiences told by the teachers.

- Optimum exhaustion of the kindergarten system and the educational potential for child development it contains – the educational counselor helps translating the teacher's aspiration for optimal development of each individual child, and that of the social group in the kindergarten, into deliberate actions within the environmental conditions. Also, in a period of developing a pedagogical core of learning contents and of striving towards implementing the literacy progress of the kindergarteners, the counselor brings the possibility for observation through the emotional world, which provides a vital balance against this trend.

- Advancing mental well-being – the educational counselor practices the advancement of mental well-being which requires deliberate and proactive actions, as well as designated programs that include aspects of prevention and life skills for the kindergarteners. Assimilating these programs, which were specifically adapted for kindergarteners, is a high priority in the counselor's work with kindergarten teachers.

These three focal points are intertwined, and allow for professional referencing a wide range of fields of action that arise from the daily routine of the kindergarten staff. To optimize climate in kindergarten class, the counselor deals with teacher practical training to improve the teacher-child dialogue, developing emotional intelligence, training and processing various boundary-related issues, restraining unusual behaviors and preventing aggression. The counselor trains kindergarten teachers, provides group instruction in various subjects such as intervention programs, and prevention programs. The work of the kindergarten staff also impacts significantly on kindergarten climate and its routine.

Developing teamwork between the kindergarten teacher and assistant, the kindergarten teacher and supplemental kindergarten teacher, and the rest of meaningful adults that routinely visit the kindergarten done via guidance and assistance in understanding patterns of interaction between the staff and the outer shell of the kindergarten, including paramedical services, psychological services and other authorities.

Another area of constant debate is that of coping with stressful situations. The counselor qualifies and trains the teacher and staff on how to deal with crisis situations and emergencies in the kindergarten, on identify-

ing children's distress signals, and on being assisted by professional parties for suitable interventions.¹⁵

On top of the above, a major issue that derives from the kindergarten teacher's needs is the area of communicating with the parents and staff. This area includes issues that express conflicts and tension of teachers and staff in regards to their relationship with the parents. The counselor's work in this matter focuses on structuring awareness and providing tools for fruitful dialogue with parents. The teachers learn to create opportunities for sharing and developing initiatives and collaborations. Alongside these, the teachers also learn to deliver a descriptive and non-judgmental reports on their child's progress in learning aspects and performance.

The Presence of Formal Kindergarten Counseling

The presence of formal kindergarten counseling is currently completing its 15th year. The scope of the service is still narrow, and it's prioritized by defined criteria. The priorities for counselor placement leans on the ministry of education's policy. With the limit of the 500 working hours not all parts of the country could receive an answer for their needs in this area. The counselor's position sums up to only a few hours for covering large areas that include more than a hundred kindergartens. The kindergarten counselors work in close connections with the kindergarten supervisor. The fulltime scope of the position should be 30 weekly hours working with an average of 120 kindergartens. In terms of the amount of resources it is part of agreement, however due to the lack of resources some of counselors are working with two or three supervisors, making it difficult to focus and providing comprehensive and systematic service. The meager extent of the position diminishes the willingness of kindergarten counselors to recruit for these jobs, and the majority of the counselors that are employed in kindergartens work concurrently as school counselors. The employment structure of counselors in the education system was formulized in forced agreements. Although, it is well coordinated between the relevant wings of the ministry of education, it is not standardized in an official and obligatory manner, and requires annual lobbying and fundraising. There is a continuous endeavor for developing unique programs for kindergarteners. Recently, emergency tools for infancy children was developed, as well as a training program for kindergarten teachers named "Kol HaGan Bama" (All Kindergarten's Stage). Currently, the education system is preparing to define climate standards suitable for kindergarteners, and there is a gradually formulating program of life skills as

¹⁵ E. Dashevsky, *Early Childhood Educational Consulting*, Echo Garden, 2006.

part of the core curriculum in kindergartens. However, despite of the extensive developments of the psychological counseling service and the department of kindergarten education, there is still much more needed development of new programs and modifying of existing programs. Thus, valuable time for development, training and implementing is required. It took much time and action to bring the supervisors, authorities and kindergarten teachers to consume this service in accordance with its relative and unique advantage. The field of kindergarten counseling was, and is still being, invested with much work of coordinating and learning towards establishing and expanding its scope. At the beginning, when counseling was first introduced into kindergartens, the focal point of the counselor in consultation was the kindergarten teacher herself, her needs, her professional deliberations and her working relations. Counseling services will be made possible for teacher's assistants and other kindergarten staff. Up until the "Ofek Hadash" (New Horizon) in 2013, the counseling service did not include direct contact with and regarding the child, the parents or other family members. Previously, the counselor worked out of early childhood division in pedagogical center, making group meetings with kindergarten teachers and individual counseling meetings regarding teacher's professional coping of her tasks and staff relationship. The counselor did not perform her job within the kindergarten. The activity and contact with the teachers was done outside working hours. After the reform, the counselor's hours are parallel to the teachers working hours in the kindergarten. The educational counselor now visits the kindergartens, whereas before she would rarely do so. Such a visit occurs if an observation is required in light of the teacher's guidance process. The purpose of this observation could come from the need to get an impression of the kindergarten's educational environment, the daily schedule, the construct of the learning program and pedagogical contents, the working relations and role division between teacher and staff.

Educational counseling for kindergartens was included in the "Ofek Hadash" (New Horizon) reform only in 2013. This was a year of changes of the role definition for educational counselors. Many hours were added, and counselors began working a minimum of ten hours. They needed to start visiting the kindergartens more often. Some counselors were employed full time, which required them to start a weekly four-hour program of life skills in one of their assigned kindergartens. Educational counseling is going through an ongoing developmental process. In the school year of 2015-2016, a new reform was introduced in kindergartens named "Saya'at Shnia" (Secondary Assistant). This reform adds a second assistant in kindergartens of

3-4 year olds, when there are more than 30 children. In addition, the ministry of education added ten weekly hours to leading kindergarten teachers to be responsible of fifteen kindergartens segments. This reform also reshaped the role of the educational counselor in the face of changes and the new officials. At this point, these changes are not substantial, All changes in the educational counseling is still insufficient and the subject faces progressive reality.¹⁶

The changes and the formulating process of kindergarten counseling allow us to observe with satisfaction at the existing accomplishments and to evaluate that in the educational system, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of this professional service. Kindergarten teachers, supervisors and all those responsible for early childhood wing, highly recognize the importance of counseling at the age of infancy and seek to expand of institutions responsibility for preschoolers. The management of the department of kindergarten education and the supervisors welcome kindergarten counseling and demand the expansion of this service. In the future, success of the service and its efficiency will be measured by a substantial decrease in the loneliness experienced by kindergarten teachers as well as by the betterment of the activity in the field of mental and functional well-being of the children and the educational staffs in kindergartens.

In the new reform, called "Hasayaat Hashnia" (Second Assistant), there has been a focal change in the systemic structure of kindergartens, and geographic clusters were chosen. A geographic cluster is combined of a group of 15 kindergartens with geographical proximity that create an optimal working model which allows for the advancement and implementation of the goals and policies of the department of kindergarten education. The geographic cluster enables the kindergartens to work as a single autonomous organizational unit. The cluster constitutes an administrative-pedagogic organizational system that unites resources for the children's and the staff's well-being, narrows gaps, strengthens the sense of belongingness to the community, endorses entrepreneurship, promotes the growth of the educational staff, enables a dialogue on the issues that preoccupy the teachers, and it enriches the professional knowledge and ways of coping with challenges in the teacher's work. The geographic cluster can also include kindergartens with children with special needs. Assigning kindergartens and their inclusion in a cluster is done by the **Cluster Committee's** discretion. Each cluster is led by a **kindergarten teacher leader** that keeps an ongoing communication with the supervisors and local kindergarten depart-

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, *Second assistant reform, leading kindergarten teachers.*

ment. The kindergartens staff of the cluster formulate goals, work plans and a working on leading topic according to the distinct features of the specific cluster. They also try to figure out what are the needs of the teachers and the community, and formulate actions that will best answer the needs of the cluster whilst providing feedback on their own activity.¹⁷ Amongst the purposes of the geographic cluster:¹⁸

- The desire to meet and expand the developmental-educational needs of the child's well-being;
- Promote collaborations between the teacher and the affiliated cluster;
- Construct a supportive social-professional space for the kindergarten teacher;
- Optimize working interfaces among kindergartens, supervision, authorities and other officials working in the cluster;
- Establish an educational sequence among educational settings in order to make the children's adjustment easier;
- Deepen the connections with the parents and community; and to promote and implement the goals and policies of the ministry of education, including those of the department of kindergarten education.

In this reform, the educational counseling work alongside the kindergarten supervisors allows the counselors to be part of the professional escort of the leading kindergarten teachers, in decision making processes, in creating the leading team and establishing its nature and in promoting the organizational change process. The educational counselor specializes in leading consultation processes among educational teams and in advancing processes that promote optimized educational climate. Alongside the supervisor, the counselor can professionally escort the leading team, demonstrate consultation processes on different issues, engage in event analysis and case studies and to promote climate issues such as relationships, team management, working with parents and handling various difficulties. In addition, the counselor can support the process of professional identity formation and job conceptualization of the kindergarten teacher leader. The foundation for the partnership that exists between educational counseling and kindergarten supervision supports the creation of various models for best advancing the role of the kindergarten teacher leaders according to the existing needs and variations.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Shefi, *Standards for professional practice in educational counseling*, Jerusalem 2009.

¹⁹ Ministry of Education, *Second assistant reform, leading kindergarten teachers*.

Cooperation Principles of Early Childhood Psychology Counselors

The existence of a nationwide spread of psychological services for kindergarteners requires planned and coordinated work with the psychological service at each locality for which the counseling service will be introduced into. The tasks fulfilled by kindergarten counselors are not meant to substitute the goals of the psychological services. This rule also applies for kindergartens who do not receive the psychological service. Hereinafter is the sequence of coordination actions:

- District psychologist, senior psychologist, senior counselor, kindergarten supervisor, and district coordinator of kindergarten counseling.

- The above are required to collaborate in order to implement regional initiatives, coordinate regional work on matters of kindergarteners and to support the required coordination on the local level.

- This forum can be used as a go to address for local officials in settling dilemmas or conflicts in implementing Psychological Counseling Service policy.

- On the local level, it is recommended to act via creating a local steering team for kindergartens, under the recommendations of the inter-departments committee that followed the kindergarten teacher's needs survey.

- In the areas that have integrated a kindergarten counselor, the senior counselor, alongside the kindergartens supervisor, ought to initiate a joint gathering of the education psychological service manager and the counselor in order to lay the way for her to start her work, on the basis of collaboration and coordination. In unclear situations regarding areas of responsibilities the district psychologist and senior counselor are to be involved.

- Psychological educational services manager or his representative and the counselor should strive towards joint work which includes mapping the customer's needs while at the same time mapping the services offered by the community, in accordance to "Service Basket" of psychological counseling service. The coordination work ought to take into account the existing frameworks and avoid overlaps. Cooperation is to be done while trying to examine further target audiences and expanding assigned activities. Anyway, the work of the counselor is not to exceed the employment structure and subordinations set out.

- The activity areas that will be **predetermined** among counselors and psychologists will be presented in front of the different target audiences: supervisory, authorities and educational teams in order to allow relevant

referrals to professionals according to their areas of expertise and **responsibilities**.

- It must be assured that the counselor's work format includes regular meetings with the educational psychological service in order to establish protocols, planning, assessment and control.

- According to psychological counseling service policy, during emergency situations the intervention of psychological counseling service officials is to be coordinated by the local psychological service's executive in full cooperation with the senior counselor. The obligation for cooperation applies to the counselor in this regard as well.²⁰

Educational Counseling in Special Education

The committee led by prof. Malka Margalit has been appointed to examine how Israeli students with learning disabilities are treated. The basis of the committee's work is the natural right of every individual for equal opportunities and society's duty to create the conditions to realize this right. The committee established that a comprehensive survey is to be held, to discover the exact number of students suffering from learning disabilities, with an estimated proportion of 10% out of the entire student population. Further recommendations regard raising awareness, professional advancement and knowledge of educators, and allocating resources and planning services to answer the needs of these students. Important recommendations in this matter regard the population that receives services from the department of kindergarten education, which state that it is required to take actions that insure that learning disabilities will be diagnosed since kindergarten; also, there is an urgent need to establish professional committees that will formulate procedures and monitoring guidelines for the available diagnostic tools and to form regional centers for diagnosis and monitoring. Namely, the emphasis is placed on early diagnosis and intervention, **forming a supportive system for kindergarten students as one of the most important operative ways this committee recommended**.²¹ This system includes: kindergarten teachers with training in special education, **educational counselors**, psychologists, paramedical developmental therapists (occupational therapists, speech therapists, physiotherapists) and expressive art therapists. This system deals with prevention and treatment for children

²⁰ Shefi, *Psychological Counseling Service (Shefi) policy issue: Work as a Consultant in early childhood*. Retrieved from Shefinet 2002: <http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Shefi/gapim/yeutz/Tafkidim/MdiniyutKdam.htm>

²¹ M. Margalit, *The Committee Report to examine maximization of abilities of students with learning disabilities*, Ministry of Education 1997.

identified with having special needs. Resources are to be dedicated to both prevention and treatment. The supportive system should focus on: guiding kindergarten teachers on the subject of proper development; creating growth-promoting and balanced-developmental conditions for all of the children, through a balanced and inclusive point of view on the child's needs; guiding teachers to understand distress signals from kids and providing them with knowledge and understanding of ways to assist and properly intervene; guiding teachers on the subject of communicating with parents, reporting the parents on their child's functioning and difficulties, and accompanying the parents; guiding the kindergarten teachers on the subject of developmental difficulties and in adjusting the kindergarten and its surrounding to the children's differential needs; guiding teachers on the inclusion and integration of special needs children (both from the integrated and integrator perspective); improving the teacher's observational and developmental assessment skills; supplementing for the teacher's assessment on children she marks as at-risk for developmental deficits, this is done by using the relevant professionals from the supportive system; building and implementing intervention programs in kindergartens and treatment centers in the community; monitoring the identified children's advancement while coordinating all relevant factors; working with parents and families of all kindergarteners on the topic of proper development, stress and crisis situations, development of struggling children and on issues of combining them in the communal system; cooperating with parents and guiding them throughout the entire process, including introductory, assessment, diagnosis and building intervention programs for struggling pupils; and finally, working with policy-makers in the department of education about the meaning of early preventive interventions in formal and informal education. **The educational counselor** is one of the partners of this supportive system for special needs children, and the kindergarten counselor has the knowledge on early childhood development, on counseling issues the regard multi-level teamwork and on life skills. Counseling in the educational system is based upon developmental principles and aspires to realize the personal, educational, social and physical needs of the pupil in every stage of his development, through an educational systemic view. There are three focal points for the counseling work: the child, the staff and the parent. The activity is performed on three levels: individual level - child, parent, team; group level - children group, parents and family, peer group; and systemic level - the child in the community, the multi-professional team. On each focal point and level of activity the counselor has different levels of involvement, such as support, assistan-

ce, partnership, initiative etc. Involvement levels are determined by the varying specifics and needs of the focal point (child, staff and parent).

Focus on Child Diagnostics - assisting in preparing a comprehensive educational program based on the results of the professional diagnosis and the child's strengths. Treatment, guidance and counseling- short-termed intervention in the individual level, and preventive intervention on the group level, in accordance with the multi-professional treatment team. Monitoring and feedback following the unique educational program for special needs children.

Focus on Parent Diagnostics - detecting emotional and educational needs and expectations of the family with the treatment team. Treatment, guidance and counseling- individual counseling and teamwork (guidance or dynamic treatment in coordination with the treatment team). Preparations for transference on the team level: diagnosis, partner to the detecting of the team's needs and expectations. Treatment, guidance and counseling- providing tools and developing the teacher's skills (i.e. dealing with aggression, opening communication channels, organizing an educational environment and agenda, dealing with behavioral problems), whilst coordinating the entire team. Assessment, feedback and control- as a staff member, the counselor encourages a dialogue amongst the officials about work ways and team development.²²

State Comptroller Report on the Subject of Kindergarten Educational Counseling

During the months of February-September, 2013, the State Controller's office examined the educational counseling system and the services it provides to schools and kindergartens. Amongst other things, the educational counselor's conditions of employment, qualifications, their ways of assessment and the supervision they receive were all examined. The State Controller's office inspection was done on: department of counseling, Haifa district, North district, Tel-Aviv district, South district, Jerusalem district, and district A - acknowledged non-official education (orthodox education cluster). Supplementary inspections were held in the Telecommunications Administration and Information Systems Office and the office of the State Comptroller's CEO. **The findings** on kindergarten education, primary schools and junior high-school did not include an obligatory standard that will provide professional counseling services in these institutions. Let it be stated that as far as 1992 the Pedagogic Secretariat in the Ministry of Education

²² Ibidem.

recommended allocating educational counseling hours for every age class, according to at least one weekly hour key for each class in primary schools and at least one and a half weekly hours for junior high-school. This recommendation was repeated in 1999 by the public committee for reducing violence amongst children and teenagers in the Israeli educational system, led by the former Minister of Education, Matan Vilnai. Repeated appeals since 2004, from psychological counseling service and counselling department for CEOs have requested to standardize educational counseling have also been left unanswered. Several kindergartens, primary schools and junior high-schools receive no educational counseling at all. In 2013 the Pedagogic Administration allocated 1,100 hours of kindergarten counseling. Psychological counseling service concluded that these hours are to be provided to 3,300 out of 14,700 active kindergartens. That is, only 22% of kindergartens will receive regular educational counseling services. The recommendations of the educational system play a central role in the social and emotional development of pupils. Due to the changes in Israel in recent years on socio-economical and defense matters, the educational system faces tough challenges in the field of mental health, which increases the need for a therapeutic system, including a professional and available educational counseling system. The inspection revealed that the employment conditions as educational counselors in the educational system, as well as their positions scope, do not allow for them to fulfill the many tasks assigned to them and to allow them to properly assist those in need of their services. This could harm the mental well-being of the individual, as well as to the functioning of the whole educational establishment. The supervision over the counseling work is also not at its best, due to the discrepancies between the number of supervisors and the number of subordinated counselors, as well as for the workload that regional supervisor's deal with, being that they are also responsible for other roles on the local and district. Being that psychological counseling service doesn't collect current information regarding the counseling activity and its success in each district, it doesn't have the tools required to implement a national policy in counseling, that relies on mapping district, sectorial and educational needs. The opinion of the State Comptroller, in light of the significance of counseling services in regards to optimal education climate and its effects on the social and emotional development of pupils, and in light of the social changes in recent years, have brought about a growth in the demand for educational counseling. Thus, there is an urgent need to settle educational counseling to all age classes. Under this settlement, a standard position for a counselor is to be made so that proper educational counseling will be guaranteed to all pupils and staffs, in schools and in kin-

dergartens, including allocating the proper resources to do so. Furthermore, proper district supervision on educational counseling ought to be provided, as well as supplementary actions required to create an updated national data base, according to which policy should be decided in this area.

Conclusion

The education system is responsible for the emotional, social and moral development of its pupils, alongside its responsibility on their cognitive and knowledgeable advancement. This conception has brought about the establishment of the educational counseling service, a professional service provided to educational institutes. The Educational Counseling Division is responsible for national policy making on providing educational services to the educational system and its institutes, for implementing this policy and on providing professional guidance and professional enhancement to the counselors via psychological counseling service instructors. The supervision and professional guidance is given by counseling supervisors, operating in the different districts. The educational counselor's areas of activity, terms of their employment, professional affiliation and occupational demands are all regulated under internal protocols of the Ministry of Education (according to which, ever since 1980, the educational counselor's areas of activity in schools are: treating the pupils social and emotional adjustment needs, intervening in danger and crisis situations, providing an educational answer for special needs students, counseling the parents and educational staff—including improving a meaningful dialogue with the students, being involved in nurturing an optimal education climate, operating and of prevention and development programs and training of kindergarten staff on optimal educational climate issue. These programs are done in classrooms and in supporting them, escorting processes in the educational institute and partnering in designing policy and so on). In recent years the need and demand for receiving counseling services in educational institutions has increased. Among other things, this is a result of social and security changes, which have forced the educational staff to deal with issues such as a crisis of values and undermining the parent's and teacher's authorities; an increasing exposure of pupils to security threats and tensions; a deepening in social gaps based on socio-economical, national, residential and other backgrounds.²³

²³ Ministry of Education, *Second assistant reform, leading kindergarten teachers*.

This article discusses the importance of education counseling, and specifically during early childhood. In my review I tried to emphasize the importance of the subject compared to the existing state. I focused on areas and responsibilities of the role, the changes and reforms of the past 15 years. My article highlights the need for a supportive system for kindergarten teachers, which stems from the complexity of the job and the feelings of loneliness and lack of emotional and professional support it entails. Kindergarten teachers also need support in the matter of special needs pupils, and when dealing with children with behavioral problems. Teachers tend to go into conflict with these students, and sometimes with their parents as well. This harms the communication in the kindergarten, an important part of the optimal education climate. Studies show that kindergarten teachers who attended group meetings of educational counseling improved the teacher's ability of problem-solving, dealing with stressful and emergency situations and managing with children with difficulties. The group counseling provides an answer to the teacher's social and emotional needs. It also raises the sense of belongingness and partnership among kindergarten teachers. The kindergarten supervisors should raise awareness amongst teachers as to the existence of an educational counselor and notify them with the counselor's areas of responsibility and expertise. They ought to convoke activities and group gatherings and to allow individualistic guidance which will support and enrich the kindergarten teachers professionally and emotionally. Research shows that a lack of professional knowledge in kindergarten teachers can prevent them from connecting with the children, while acquiring knowledge enhances the amount and quality of connecting and working with the children.

In spite of the existing condition of too few hours of counseling in kindergartens, as opposed to the dire need and affinity of the kindergarten and the kindergarten teacher to educational counseling, there is still an optimistic picture, in my view. Although there is still a lack of consultation hours in kindergartens and despite the need for frequent relationship of teacher and kindergarten educational consulting service, in my view the overall picture is a relatively optimistic one due to the fact there are a lot of changes and progress done in the right direction.

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