

"You and I will change the world"

From passivity to change leadership among preschoolers¹

Dr. Anat Porat and Ran Cohen Harounoff

Every morning, on their way to the Almog preschool in Holon, a city in the center of Israel, the children came across stray cats. The children became interested in the cats and their teacher, because she loved animals and because she listened to the children, thought this would be an excellent opportunity for them to get to know this animal they saw every day from a different perspective. Through their research, the children learned that a cat needs warmth, tenderness, play and consideration. They decided to build the cats 'homes' to shelter them on the cold winter days. The children asked lots of questions such as: "Who are these stray cats? Who looks after them? Who should look after them? What is our responsibility? What do they need in winter? What can we build their 'homes' of? What should be inside them? How will we know the cats are using the 'homes'?" Following the learning and research process, each group of children designed one 'home' as they saw fit. The highlight of the project was enlisting the children's parents to distribute explanatory flyers to the apartment buildings in the neighborhood and then placing the structures the children had built in various places. "The project helped me convey to the children in practice and not just in theory what it means to help others in general and to show compassion for animals in particular. These are values that have accompanied them ever since."

(Lilach, the Almog preschool teacher)

¹ In this article we use the term 'preschoolers' to refer to children up to the age of 6.

The 'cat home' project is an example of cultivating children's predisposition to initiate and take responsibility for their environment. In this article we will claim that a high quality preschool in the 21st century should promote and encourage **'impact-oriented learning'**. It is a preschool in which the environment and culture create space for the children to voice their thoughts, take a stand, act and have an impact on their world. We will observe and examine how the educational setting can encourage children to be proactive and activist both inside and outside the preschool.

The 21st century is an era of very powerful technological changes (e.g. the smartphone) and equally powerful social ones (e.g. the breakdown of the traditional family, globalization). These changes demand flexibility, being able to cope with uncertainty and take risks, but also being socially responsible for the world we live in. A predisposition towards initiative and activism may help the individual cope in a changing world, promote awareness, caring, and personal responsibility for society and the emergent surroundings. The importance of early childhood and the tremendous impact it has on shaping personality (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) oblige us to examine how we can adapt early childhood education in general and learning activities in preschool in particular to the nurturing of these predispositions.

From passivity to activity in the preschool

Many preschools today focus on **passive learning** –i.e. the children mainly observe – an internal experience while they receive static' knowledge from their teacher. This kind of learning suits some children and also reflects the preschool culture and teacher preferences. An example of this would be when the main learning process at the preschool has all the children sitting together, listening and responding to the teacher's closed questions to which the answers are known in advance (e.g. "Children, who can tell me what the symbols of the religious festival of ... are?). The daily schedule in this kind of preschool has preset 'stations' the children have to go through, and art and crafts activities are structured and offer a uniform approach to the materials.

Another way of learning known as **reactive learning**, i.e. the main activity is a reaction to other children or to the adults. For example, the children join in a game only when asked to do so, or go to a table with an activity only after the teacher suggests it to them; they work with materials only after the teacher shows them what to do. This primarily involves imitating their peers or an internal movement created within the child following requests from others around them. The preschool environment and how it functions may also encourage reactive behavior among the children.

In recent years there has been a greater awareness of meaningful learning and children's participation in their learning process. Many educational settings now emphasize hands-on, experiential **active learning**, and adopt a 'free flow' daily schedule (Levin, 1989) that enables the children to choose and act according to their preferences. For example, active children are involved in how the preschool

functions, they join games on their own initiative, they suggest playing games to others, they offer solutions to problems that arise at the preschool or resolve conflict with peers. Active learning takes place in a framework determined by the preschool staff members who decide on the learning content, the organization of the space and the schedule. Very often the decisions are made while listening to the children, but without the children having any impact on the preschool experience and functioning.

'Impact-oriented learning' in preschool

Through our work with early childhood education systems we have identified two modes of learning that have developed in the preschools we have been accompanying in recent years – proactive and activist. These two modes comprise the concept of '**impact-oriented learning**'. When this is applied frequently in the preschool, it promotes children's initiative, involvement and self-expression. In other words, these are the learning processes that enable children to have an impact on their lives, on their preschool peers' lives and even on society and the surroundings beyond the preschool.

A. Proactive learning – the behavior of proactive people is a function of their own decisions and not of those of their environment (Covey, 1989). It involves initiative in which children come up with the unexpected and have an impact on the educational space; they initiate games, lead processes among the society of the children (and sometimes even among the adults), change the physical environment of the preschool and influence its culture. Examples of this can be seen in "**independent spaces**", a practice developed in the Israeli town of Ramat Gan by the municipal education staff. This practice encourages and enables the children to take initiative, explore and implement their ideas and passions. The children are partners in making decisions in various areas; they have a 'voice' in the kindergarten and the possibility of influencing their surroundings. In "independent spaces", the children planned and created new spaces in their preschools such as a fish pond in the yard, they invented and created outdoor games, they emptied out a tiny room that was used a workshop to create a 'listening' corner they created, they redesigned the family corner at the preschool after thoroughly investigating family corners in Israel and elsewhere. The children also influence the choice of learning content to suit their interests. For example, at the Eshel preschool, the children made music on various objects and made a lot of noise. They asked: "How can we make music together without making too much noise?" They tried to play in various parts of the preschool, at different volumes and on different 'instruments'. They investigated 'people who play music together' – orchestras and bands to learn what makes it possible to play together. This research inspired them and they decided to give a rock show (which is especially noisy). For the show, the children looked into different types of music, paid attention to the differences between them and how to play them. The rock show at the end of the year party was an exciting finale to an in-depth learning process. In another preschool, the children chose to learn about superheroes. They asked and investigated:

What is a hero? Who are the superheroes? If I were a superhero, who would I be? The topic ended with a display of superhero costumes the children made. Proactive learning combines initiatives – from the children, from the preschool staff and from the dialogue between them.

B. Activist learning is a process following which some action will be initiated. The aim of the action is to take a stand, lead change and have an impact on society and one's surroundings. While proactive learning enlists the children's initiatives to their needs and those of their peers and the preschool, activist learning steers conversation and action towards creating broader social change. It is a way to encourage civic responsibility and caring. It strengthens children's critical thinking and the belief that they have a 'voice' in broader society as well nurtures their sense of efficacy and the belief in their ability to be influential citizens. For example, in one of the preschools, the children worked on making the building accessible to the father of one of the children who is in a wheelchair. They worked with the local authority and as a result of dealing with this, the issue of accessibility in society arose. Dealing with accessibility led to a meeting with the blind relative of one of the children and learning about how to cope with impaired vision (Braille, guide dogs, special devices). In another instance, in the Mango preschool, the children decided to hold a 'road safety march' to raise awareness after one of the children in their neighborhood was hurt in an accident. The story about building homes for cats mentioned in the introduction to this article is another excellent example of activism among preschoolers.

At preschool one can and should be able to see all the components of learning we have mentioned here. However, it is important not to ignore the fact that the more dominant learning components in preschools are still those of passive, reactive and active learning. Emphasis should be placed on encouraging the teaching staff to significantly increase the amount of 'impact-oriented learning' in their preschools.

Ways to foster 'impact-oriented learning'

An educational environment that fosters 'impact-oriented learning' perceives the child as having civil rights, and as having influence and being influenced, and engages in nurturing predispositions towards initiative and activism. The teaching staff can do this in three ways: educational dialogue, children's participation, and initiative-enhancing regularities.

Educational discourse – encouraging signs of proactive and activist learning in creating participatory discourse with the children rather than power discourse. Participatory discourse typically shows interest in the children's preferences, brainstorming problems that arise during preschool life and encouraging children to take responsibility for their lives at the preschool. The participatory discourse covers open questions regarding theories children have about the world. This kind of discourse is dialogic, empathetic and respectful of different reactions from the children and tries to

understand their ideas, needs and feelings. During participatory discourse, the adult yields control and suspends personal knowledge in order to allow the children to express themselves and feel the experience of having an impact. Moreover, discourse at the preschool focuses on 'big' philosophical and social issues in which children are usually interested such as: "Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?" "What does it mean to be strong?" "What is love?" and so forth.

Children's participation – Children's participation refers to involvement and the role they play in the educational setting. Encouraging proactive learning and belief in the children's abilities will enable them to take part in decision-making processes. It is the adult who decides what issues are suitable for the children to take part in, and in what areas the staff members will make the decisions on their own. However, an attentive staff can identify ideas that are important to the children or modes of action that suit their needs, even when they had not thought of involving the children in those decisions beforehand.

Examples of decisions suitable for children's participation according to 'impact-oriented learning' might be: How should we celebrate birthdays in our class? How should we celebrate a certain festival? Today we are having a 'different day', so how would you like to arrange our schedule for the day? What would you like us to make for breakfast tomorrow? How should we play so that it is easier for us to tidy up at the end of the day? Each such decision is made after a meaningful discussion that allows identification of a range of options and the advantages and disadvantages of each. This kind of discussion reinforces the understanding that every choice involves giving up on another option.

Children can also participate in choosing learning content. One option is to ask the children directly: What interests you? What would you like us to explore together? Another option is to observe the children and learn what interests them and advance their interests as part of the curriculum. For example, in the Eshel preschool, during playtime the children built tents out of large pieces of cloth and items of furniture from the 'house' corner of the preschool. Every time more than one child went into a tent it collapsed. This caused conflict among them and the desire to understand what caused the collapse. The children made various suggestions and tried them out, but the tent was still unstable. The staff suggested that the children investigate how to create 'stability' so that the tent wouldn't fall. In order to understand what stability is, the children observed situations in which they themselves are stable and examined what helped other tents to be stable. One of the insights the children acquired was that the tent should be put up in the yard because 'there you can put sticks in the cloth and in the sand'. The children designed their tent and built it with the help of the parents who joined in for this task.

This example emphasizes the ability of the staff to recognize what interests the children, to show they are impressed and to allow the children to invest time in something that interests them and create a proactive learning space.

Initiative-enhancing regularity – These regularities refer to the physical and organizational space, which are the direct outcome of the preschool schedule and functioning. The staff creates a regularity in which structured components advance the initiative. For example, creating a time axis with different stages for advancing an initiative, starting from dreaming about the initiative, through the stages of planning, implementation and reflection on what was done. Another regularity is planning a daily schedule in which the children can play and act freely over time as they see fit. When the schedule is dense and full of staff initiatives, there is no room left for children's initiatives, for proactive learning. In contrast, free activity time in which there is a lot of playtime invites initiatives from the children and complex social and cognitive coping.

In summation, **'impact-oriented learning'** promotes children's ability to be citizens with initiative, social awareness and responsibility. When you have a real dialogue with children in which they have room to voice their opinions and theories of the world, when you allow them to take part in making decisions that affect them in the preschool, when the preschool has regularities that promote initiative, children develop the habit of being proactive and activist. Staff members who see the preschool as a space for educational initiative and set themselves challenges of innovative thinking will be ready to seek the unknown path that best suits them and the preschool children. Such a staff will be a meaningful model of proactive and activist learning for the children. Using the compass of 'impact-oriented learning' and the initiative "pie" shown below will help observation of the existing learning in the preschool and the creation of movement towards the desired change.

Impact-oriented learning compass for preschool

	Not at all	Some	A lot
To what extent does the adult in the preschool class ask open-ended questions? (Where the answer is not known in advance)			
Is it the adult that asks most of the questions in the preschool?			
Most of the time is it the adult who answers the questions and provides the sources of information?			
To what extent are the children partners in planning activities?			
To what extent are the children partners in carrying out activities?			
To what extent do the children initiate games and activities during playtime?			
To what extent are the children partners in designing and building the activity corners?			
To what extent are the children partners and influence the planning of the daily schedule?			
To what extent are the children partners/initiators in determining the learning content?			
To what extent do the children initiate activities for the community of preschool children?			
Does the preschool have regularities that promote children's independent conflict resolution			
To what extent are the children partners/initiators for parties, festivals and other celebrations at the preschool?			
To what extent do the children initiate and conduct activities outside the preschool, in their surrounding community?			
To what extent do the children ask critical questions about society and the environment?			
To what extent do the children initiate activities that contribute to society and the environment outside the preschool?			

Initiative "pie" at the preschool

Prepare a circular "pie" model divided into the five types of learning at the preschool. Each part should represent its relative role in the preschool today.

- Passive learning – the children learn through observation, inner experience, and receipt of 'static' information from the teacher.
- Reactive learning – the children react to contents and activities presented or brought to them.
- Active learning – the children are active in the preschool spaces and initiate play, activities and learning within the spaces and regularities constructed by the preschool staff.
- Proactive learning – the children are partners and initiators in building the educational environment of the preschool, learning content, activities, how it functions and its climate (conflict resolution, special projects, parties and events)
- Activist learning – the children ask critical questions about society and the environment and take action to effect change also in spaces outside the preschool.



References

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