



Methodology

# Preschoolers in the Education City

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**The Institute for Democratic Education**  
Educational Innovativeness from a Democratic Point of View

“

*You (the adults) say: We are bored by children.*

*You are right.*

*You say: Because we must lower ourselves to their concepts.*

*In this you are mistaken.*

*It is not this which tires us, but rather the fact that we must climb and rise to their concepts...climb, stretch out our hands, stand on tiptoe, reach out, so as not to hurt.*

”

(Janusz Korczak, “Pedagogical Writings,” 1945)

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# Keywords

*Preschool age, democratic education, Education City, change process, urban space, progressive education, open education, dialogue*

# Abstract

**A** preschool in the spirit of democratic education is more suited to the 21st century than traditional preschools, because it incorporates, in a balanced way, characteristics of support for the child's individual development alongside social values and environmental awareness. A change in the urban school system should begin in the preschool system, and should be built on parallel levels that provide support for the individual, the peers, and the entire community/environment. This document is a guide to making the urban system friendlier for the next generation – from the unique characteristics of a democratic preschool to the necessary steps for effecting a change in the urban space.



# What's a "Preschool in the Spirit of Democratic Education"?



*Kabbalat Shabat: child, mother and preschool teacher*

## INTRODUCTION

One Friday several years ago, as always, I arrived at one of the preschools I was running in Jerusalem. As part of a years-long tradition and a **community-centered** concept of preschools, the preschool was holding a Kabbalat Shabbat (Welcoming the Sabbath) ceremony with its entire community (parents, siblings and grandparents). When I entered the preschool, I detected a slightly different atmosphere, an unusual amount of excitement in the air. The two-and-a-half-year-old girl who was supposed to light the candles (as part of my policy of promoting equality in education, the preschool had all the kids – girls as well as boys – take turns lighting the candles) was standing behind the candle table, excited. To my surprise, she was holding a flashlight instead of matches, and the candles themselves were decorated with cellophane flames. I realized that something unusual was taking place. The teacher, Oded (as part of the same egalitarian approach, I tried to hire men and women alike to fill the ranks of the preschool staff) ran the ceremony as naturally as

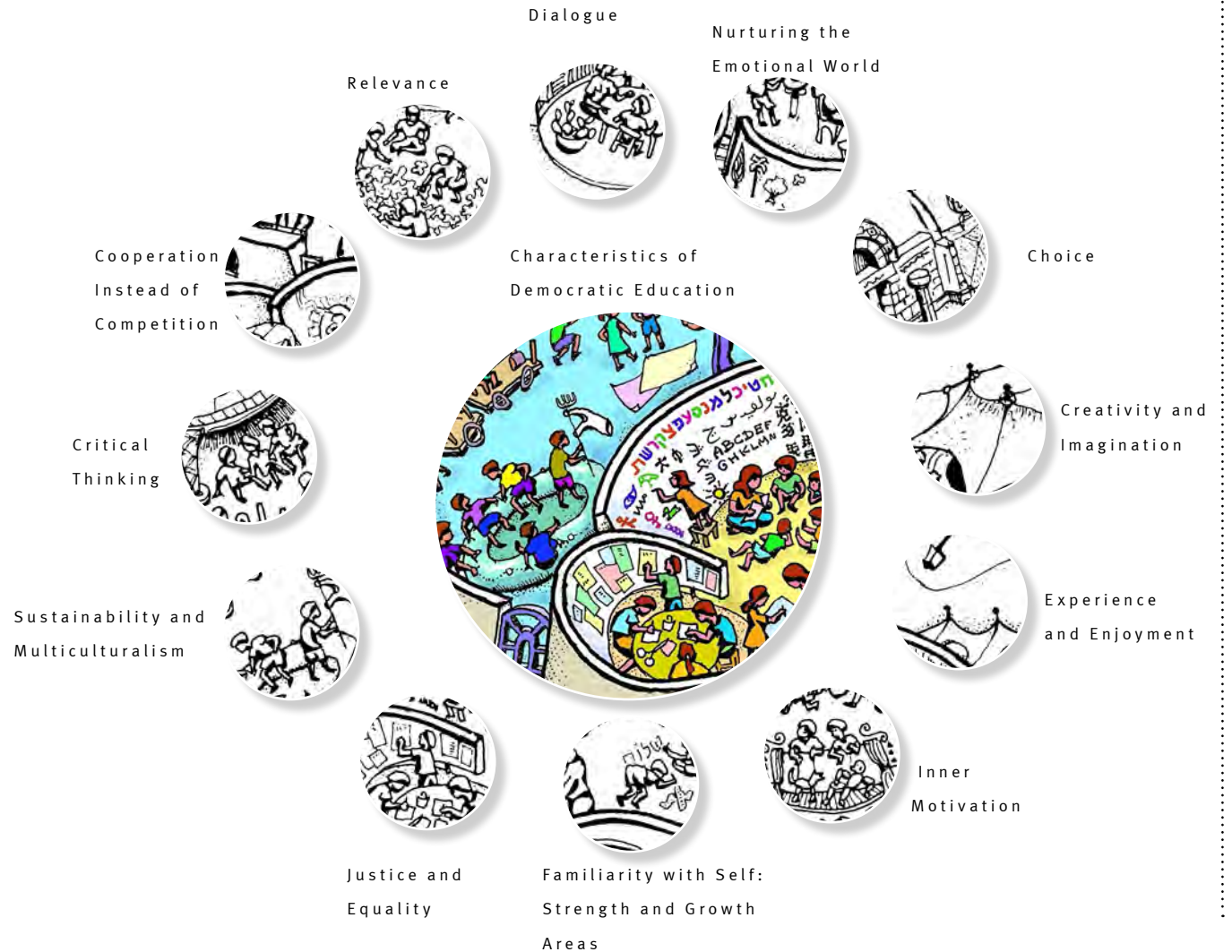
could be. I very quickly fit in and became part of the scene, as did the preschoolers and their parents, and we all witnessed a totally virtual candle lighting ceremony that included all the familiar customs. The girl and her parents were very excited, and I could see how it affected the whole community. The entire community supported the world of **creativity, playing and imagination** that Winnicott (1971) dubbed "the potential space," and enabled the girl to undergo an experience of **empowerment**.

Following the Kabbalat Shabbat, I went over to Oded to praise him for **adapting the candle lighting ceremony for the girl's individual needs**. He told me that, for the past month, he had been conducting a **dialogue** with the girl and her parents about the candle lighting ceremony. Since the preschool allows much freedom of **choice** in all its activities, Oded could have given in to the girl, who had been adamantly refusing to light the candles, and moved on to the next child on the list. The decision to refrain from giving in and try to understand what was behind the girl's refusal

led to an amazing dialogue between Oded and the girl and her parents, a dialogue that made room for her world and **unique personal needs**. When it eventually became clear to Oded that the girl was afraid of the fire itself, and therefore refused to light the candles, he planned a ceremony that was adapted for the girl's **emotional needs** and gave her a feeling of **empowerment and self-confidence**. For a long time afterward, I could sense the impact of the process on the entire preschool.

The past decade has seen an increase in academic and non-academic papers and studies dealing with democratic education. Most of them dealt with democratic education in the schools; very little has been written about democratic preschool education.

In this article, I will try to characterize all the aspects of democratic preschool education and show how it differs from the traditional preschool education with which we are all familiar. I will also discuss how we can introduce democratic education into the various preschool systems within the urban space, touching on the latent opportunity for an educational and social change that starts in preschool.





A preschool in the spirit of democratic education stresses each child's **personal development, independence, uniqueness**, and integration into his/her peer group and the society at large. A preschool in this spirit furthers democratic values such as **free choice and equality**, out of an awareness that the preschoolers are different from one another. The preschool also helps the kids find and cultivate their **strengths**. It encourages **cooperation among the kids rather than competition**; the use of **dialogue** (Katzenelson 2005) as a key mode of communication at the preschool; gives expression to **the kids' emotional world**, makes them feel that they **belong**; and involves them in determining the activities at the preschool.

The learning at a preschool run in the spirit of democratic education also revolves around the kids' interests. It is **relevant** to them, and fosters their **creativity and develops their imaginations**. The learning at such a preschool mainly takes place through **internal motivation, experience and enjoyment**. The use of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993) in preschool activities creates compatibility with the **nature, traits and strengths** of each and every individual in the group. The preschool promotes **critical thinking**, the values of sustainability and environmental responsibility, as well as **community involvement and multiculturalism**.

Education in this spirit is tailored to the needs of

an ever-changing society, as well as to the evolving job market of the 21st century. This is education that encourages kids to be independent, take responsibility, cooperate with the other members of their group, get to know themselves and their strengths, exhibit sensitivity and empathy toward others, and care about the environment. Such a preschool also fosters kids' curiosity and love for learning, and arouses their creative and critical thinking. All these are intended to help kids cope with the changing world and help create a better society – one that accepts the differences among its members and cares for the community and environment in which we live.

# How is it different?

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRADITIONAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Traditional education<sup>1</sup> is a by-product of the Industrial Revolution, and is tailored to the changes that took place in society over the previous centuries. Even the preschools, which were created a few years after the schools by Froebel in 1835 (Froebel 2005), incorporated many elements in this spirit.

Democratic education is a branch of progressive education, which developed at the beginning of the last century (Dewey 1969, Korczak 1963, et al.), and free/open education (Neil 1977, Greenberg 2002, et al.), which was part of the Flower Children Revolution in the 60s. In Israel, there were several thinkers and educators who promoted progressive, open education, most notably

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter in this article, the concept "traditional education" does not refer to religious education, but rather to "regular," non-progressive education.

Moshe Caspi (1978), Zvi Lamm (1983) and Zvi Lavi (1978). The sphere of preschool education, too, spawned various progressive approaches, first the one developed by Maria Montessori in Italy (Montessori 1964) and later the one espoused by Gideon Levin (1986, 1996) in Israel; the latter developed the Flowing Preschool Approach (Dayan 2001).

Democratic education combines individual values, which constitute the basis for progressive, open education, and collective societal/environmental values, which mainly manifest themselves in educational approaches toward environmental education and critical pedagogy. Although some say that an educational approach combining individual and societal values is a contradiction from a teaching point of view (Lamm, 1973, Egan 2009), I believe that such a combination is possible, and even utterly suits the ever-evolving processes that are taking place in the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the one hand, we are observing powerful processes of individuation, while, on the other hand, we are seeing significant social and environmental processes (the worldwide social protest, ever-increasing environmental

responsibility and awareness). By combining these values as early as the preschool level, we provide an atmosphere that can foster personal development as well as healthy, empathetic and cooperative social relationships.

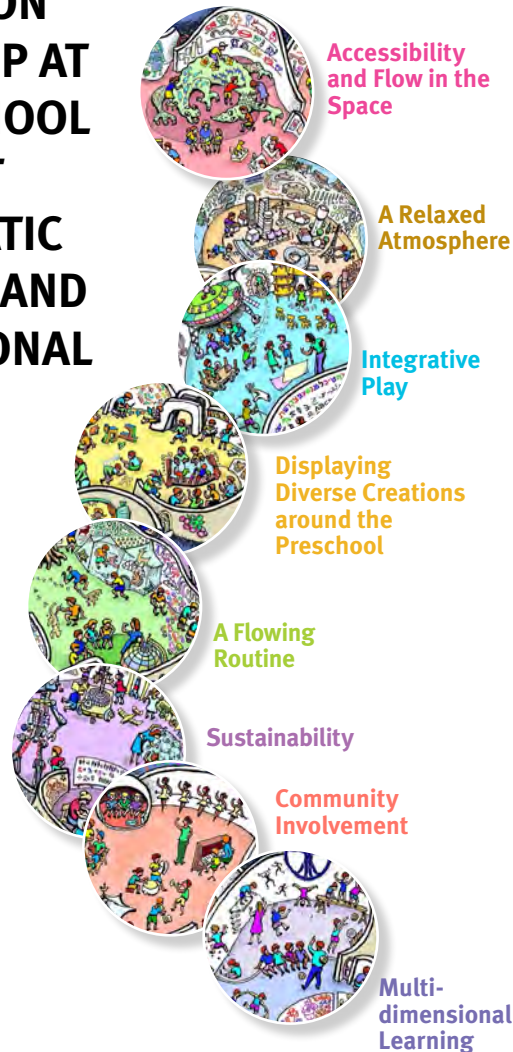
Democratic education creates an alternative to traditional education and emphasizes characteristics that differ from those of traditional education. These characteristics also manifest themselves in democratic education at the preschool level.

The physical setup at the preschool in the spirit of democratic education is different from the traditional preschool; the atmosphere is different as well.



## A COMPARISON OF THE SET-UP AT THE “PRESCHOOL IN THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION” AND THE TRADITIONAL PRESCHOOL

The set-up, atmosphere and activities at the preschool in the spirit of democratic education reflect the educational approach behind it.



### Accessibility and Flow in the Space

Most of the games, arts and crafts materials, and activity corners at the preschool are available to the kids all day long, and are therefore within their reach. In many cases, even the playground is open and accessible, at the same time that the indoor activity corners are. Throughout most of the day, the teaching staff lets the kids go back and forth between the various indoor activity corners and the playground as they please. In many cases, the preschool might look somewhat messy, but the “mess” stems from developed sociodramatic play by the kids, creativity and cooperation among them. We can call such a mess an “organized mess” – one that looks totally different from a mess resulting from vandalism, indifference and disrespect. A person paying a brief visit to the preschool cannot always tell the difference, but the kids’ freedom of choice vis-à-vis the activities creates a different playing atmosphere, the price of which may be a certain amount of disorder and, at times, greater wear-and-tear of games, toys, and arts and crafts materials.



### A Relaxed Atmosphere

Unlike the physical mess, the atmosphere at the preschool is characterized by surprising calm, very few aggressive and violent acts, and developed social play. This unique atmosphere mainly stems from two things:

- o the kids are given the opportunity to fulfill themselves by choosing their own areas of interest and developing their strengths
- o and, of course, they are given a lot of time to try things and develop their social skills by engaging in joint sociodramatic play.

At the traditional preschool, only a small number of the games and arts and crafts materials are accessible to the kids. The activity corners are open for the kids at various times of the day, and the kids use them only at designated times, and, in most cases, not simultaneously. Sometimes the kids are required to play a game or create artwork without being given any choice. The teaching staff places emphasis on keeping the preschool neat and clean throughout the day, e.g. the kids are required to put the toys and games away immediately after they finish playing with them, and they’re not allowed to move games and materials around



the building. As a result, the kids can't go back to a game they started, move from game to game, or combine the various worlds at the preschool.



### Integrative Play

At a democratic preschool, for example, a group of kids can start a game by building an entire imaginary world with blocks and plastic animals, and then go over to the Costume Corner and become creatures in the world they've created, move on to the Kitchen Corner and prepare potions and then go back and finish their game at the Building Block Corner. Such a game would never be played at a traditional preschool. Why? Because as soon as the kids would like to move from one activity corner to another, they would have to pick up the blocks, and then the game, the imagination and creativity they might have developed would immediately be nipped in the bud. Limits and order exist at a democratic preschool, too, and they're part of the daily routine. For example, the teaching staff and the kids straighten up the preschool together twice each day, but not every time the kids finish playing a game.



### Displaying Diverse Creations around the Preschool

The walls of a democratic preschool convey dissimilarity, not uniformity: There is divergent artwork made from a wide range of materials, reflecting the kids' varying areas of

interest, as well as their creativity and diversity.

The walls of a traditional preschool mainly reflect the subjects that the teacher has chosen to teach (or which have been dictated to her), and often the kids' artwork is identical and does not reflect their personal interests or creativity. At such a preschool, for example, all the kids make a picture of a citrus tree from the same materials, and under the same guidance given by the teacher (sometimes even based on a model she has prepared in advance), such that, at the end of the process, all the citrus trees will look like rows of a uniform orchard.



### A Flowing Routine

A traditional preschool has a set, clear-cut routine with understood, planned activities. A democratic preschool also has a clear-cut routine (as at a traditional preschool), but it gives the kids the freedom to choose their activities and "flow" among them. Such freedom enables the kids to express and develop their strengths. The freedom to move freely among activities enables the kids to work at their own pace.

The strict routine at a traditional preschool may create an atmosphere characterized by rigidity and a feeling of frustration, causing the teaching staff to react by setting strict limits to prevent the

kids from expressing their anger and frustration in aggressive acts. When there is virtually no freedom of choice, and the kids have to spend a significant part of their day doing activities that, in the best-case scenario, do not interest them, and, in the worst-case scenario, frustrate them, the staff must enforce discipline and establish a very rigid framework so that the kids don't channel that frustration into aggressive acts, harm to others, and vandalism.



## Multidimensional Learning

At a traditional preschool, a significant place is reserved for cognitive learning. At such a preschool, the teacher is the source of knowledge: she's the one who organizes gatherings and activities related to holidays, the seasons, health ("Me and My Body"), nature and the environment, etc. The subjects taught at traditional kindergartens are dictated by the Ministry of Education; those taught at preschools are dictated by norms that have taken root over the years (that's because no governmental body is responsible for the educational content for those ages). The subjects usually narrow down to the holidays and seasons, and dictate this rigid schedule.

At a democratic preschool, the learning takes



place at all levels of the multidimensional dialogue: emotional, cognitive, physical and philosophical. The activities and learning, which encourage the kids to use their various intelligences (Armstrong 1996), are hands-on and relevant. Many of the subjects taught at the preschool are a

by-product of the kids' curiosity, and they involve the whole community.

To further illustrate the difference between a traditional preschool and a democratic preschool, we'll use the example of a daycare center for 3- and 4-year-olds where a large group of kids

got interested in space and the “world” beyond the earth. Their sociodramatic games revolved around that subject. After becoming aware of this, the teacher introduced content and activities related to the subject. Through arts and crafts, books, films, shows and other activities (all the kids expressed themselves according to their strengths and areas of interest), they addressed philosophical questions involving faith (e.g. Where is God? What does he look like? Are there Martians? If there are, why don’t they come here?); questions dealing with our responsibility for the environment and global warming; and emotional issues such as fears of Martians and the dark, and how to cope with those fears. Following the learning process, there was a Purim party on the space theme, with the parents’ participation. The party included the making of costumes (astronauts, Martians); a voyage in a spaceship built by the kids; a play by the parents; and a 3D game about the solar system.



### Community Involvement

Active involvement by the parents (not just as spectators, but as partners in the activities with the kids) is also a salient feature of a democratic school. The community of parents is perceived as both a key factor affecting the atmosphere and also as a

partner in creating the educational method that guides the preschool. Besides the extensive community life at the preschool (joint field trips; joint Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies; learning activities organized by the parents; recruitment of parents for joint tasks; joint parties; etc.), emphasis is placed on the multiculturalism in human society, and especially on the various cultures represented in the preschool. For example, if there’s a Christian family at the preschool, time will be devoted to learning about Christian holidays and customs. Another example is the Sigd Holiday celebrations at the preschool since some of the kids are of Ethiopian origin: Some of the dolls at the preschool were dark-skinned, and the Doll Corner included doll-carrying cloth (large pieces of cloth like those used by Ethiopian woman for carrying their babies). The yard of this preschool contained an Ethiopian hut, which had been built with the parents’ help.



### Sustainability

Education for sustainability also constitutes part of the democratic preschool experience and one of the main values behind the democratic approach: recycling, re-using, educating for nature conservation, preparing compost, creating a community garden, using natural materials. Environmental and community responsibility

is talked about a lot at the preschool, and the subject constitutes a key source in the learning process at a democratic preschool. In his article, Wenger (2008) even claimed that environmental education is a key part of the humanistic worldview in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Proper environmental education is therefore the humanistic education of our day. It nurtures thinking, moral students; students who deal with substantive questions about life and how it should be led; students who are not afraid to tackle issues involving injustice and look for ways to right the wrongs; students who believe they have the duty to leave their children with a world that is better than the one they received; students who realize that the world wasn’t something we inherited from our parents, but rather a deposit given to us by our children.” (Wenger 2008)

Here’s an example: At the Lag Ba’Omer party at the preschool, there was a discussion about the holiday, the personal and community experience of the bonfire itself, and the environmental damage it could cause. The adults and the kids made a joint decision to build one small bonfire for both grades; each family brought paper plates and disposable utensils; the kids and their parents cleaned up the bonfire site; and, of course, made sure to burn materials that are not toxic or harmful to the ozone layer. Stress was placed on leaving the site fit for future users.

## Comparison table: the Characteristics of a Traditional Preschool and a Democratic Preschool

Preschool Characteristics	Traditional Preschool	Democratic Preschool
Organization of space	A clearcut division of the various activities (arts and crafts, games, reading...). Kids can't move among the various sections of the preschool or shift objects among the various sections of the preschool unless the teacher allows them to, kids have to straighten up the corner they were in before they go on to the next space.	Kids "flow" among the various spaces in the preschool: A kid can choose the space he wants to be in and stay there as long as he'd like – this provides integrative sociodramatic play that combines the various spaces in the preschool.
Daily routine	Set by the teacher for all the kids; time is allotted for each activity.	The kids can work at their own pace: They can decide when they want to move from space to space and from activity to activity.
Who decides?	The teacher decides for all the kids, who have virtually no freedom of choice.	The teacher is attentive to the kids and chooses activities and subjects on the basis of their areas of interest and strength, the kids are given free choice within the spaces and activities offered by the preschool.
What the kids produce	Mainly as a result of the content the teacher has chosen to teach. The kids' creations are very similar in terms of the materials and work method used, and are all based on the "right" model shown by the teacher.	The creations are different in terms of topics, materials and techniques, reflecting the kids' individuality.
Content	Dictated in advance by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor, or what is customarily taught at the preschool.	Stems from the kids' and staff's areas of interest and strengths.
Type of learning	Mainly cognitive.	A combination of physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual learning.
Community involvement	Limited involvement by the parents – mainly as spectators at events initiated by the teacher.	Stress on the parents' active involvement in the life of the preschool.

Sustainability

No special attention is paid to the topic

## WARMTH, LEARNING, SECURITY, SOCIALIZATION AND PLAY (WLSSP): THE ESSENTIALS OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOR PRESCHOOLERS



Stress on education for sustainability, and the topic is given expression in various aspects of the life of the preschool. A case in point: One preschool teacher was very much put off by one of the girls. After the matter was discussed with her, she realized that the girl reminded her of the “class queens” who used to bully her when she was a girl. From that moment on, it was possible to help her work on her relationship with the girl because she was aware of the reason for her behavior, which made the process easier. Support and guidance for the teachers are vital, enabling them to consider and deeply understand their conduct and the reasons they act one way or another at the preschool. Such support facilitates containment of the teacher (and, indirectly, containment of the preschoolers, as well) and contributes greatly to an atmosphere characterized by openness, bonding and mutual learning.



### Warmth

“Warmth” relates to the deep, significant relationship that must exist between the adult caregiver/teacher (hereafter: “the Teacher”) and the child. This relationship must be characterized by physical closeness – a warm, loving touch; deep, genuine familiarity; containment; empathy; awareness of emotions; and the setting of clearcut limits, while showing flexibility and openness to each child’s needs. All of these things make the child feel wanted and secure at the preschool, and strengthen him emotionally.

Interwoven into the warmth is the adult’s familiarity with himself and with the basic assumptions that guide his actions. This familiarity must be deep and take into account various influences outside the preschool setting that affect the way he acts with the kids in preschool, e.g. his home, family, society, background, perceptions, beliefs, and past, especially his childhood experiences.



### Learning

At the preschool level, learning takes place everywhere all the time in various ways: physically, sensorially, intellectually, emotionally and socially. The teacher’s job is to conceptualize and mediate the learning process. If the teacher is the one leading and guiding the process, he must ensure that it is as hands-on and relevant as possible, i.e. “connected” to the kids’ lives. The learning process

<sup>2</sup> In Hebrew, the acronym is symbolic for “HOT MILK”

must speak to the child's external content world as well as to his internal content world, such that every topic that arises will be checked in terms of what it arouses emotionally in each child. The learning process must be adapted to the child's age, development and ability, and create something mutual in the dialogue through the "taught material." This means there must be a challenging learning process that incorporates hands-on experiences (Dewey 1969), i.e. games, arts and crafts, etc. – a process incorporating various dimensions, multiple intelligences and diverse abilities (Gardner 1993). For example, it isn't enough that the kids learn about the symbols of the holiday of Hanukkah; they must also learn what the holiday arouses in them emotionally toward Judah the Maccabee, i.e. the stories of heroism and the fears those stories bring to the surface. For the holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, for example, the kids should learn about how a bow-and-arrow works and make their own bows-and-arrows with the teacher's guidance.



## Security

Security is the essence of the preschooler's relationship with his teacher and must be given to the preschooler along with warmth (Maslow 1971). Trust is the basis for the initial connection between the child and his teacher, and stems from a sincere, caring approach on the part of the teacher.

Security is a byproduct of an environment characterized by free, independent and pleasant behavior. In physical terms, the space must be one that provides the child with the security to fulfill his desires and does not expose him to harm by someone else. An environment provides security when it's based on a known, clearcut framework of rules and principles that allow as much freedom of choice and action as possible. The teacher must adapt the framework to the kids as a group (based on its unique composition and dynamics) and, to the greatest extent possible, as individuals within that group. The teacher must respect and maintain the framework, but, at the same time, ensure that it provides each child with warmth and a clear message that he's free to feel, think, choose and act. All these things, of course, are also important for the parents and their peace of mind.

Striking a balance between limits and freedom

is no trivial matter. Insecurity can result from a lack of limits or when there's no balance between limits and freedom.

Complete freedom bordering on anarchy causes a situation in which the strong dominate the weak and the laws of the jungle prevail. When that happens in a preschool, the kids are insecure and feel that no one's protecting them. Even when freedom of choice and decision-making responsibilities are given to a child, they must be adapted to his age, developmental stage, nature, skills and abilities; otherwise they may constitute an experience that undermines his security and overloads him emotionally.

For example, one preschool teacher I observed allowed her kids, as part of an open education format, almost total freedom at the preschool, without sufficiently clear limits. There was virtually no daily routine, without any anchors. When a kid vandalized preschool property or hurt another kid, her reaction was forgiving and totally unclear. Much too often there was inadequate supervision of the kids. Very quickly the kids became verbally and physically abusive of their peers. The preschool conveyed a message of insecurity. After reflecting the situation to the teacher, she and I began formulating a clearcut, though not rigid, framework and clear behavior rules. As a result, each time a kid acted aggressively, the teacher immediately stopped the activity and led a class

discussion that preserved the kids' dignity. The daily schedule was clearer and behavior rules became such an integral part of the activities that the kids obeyed them out of habit, without having to be reminded of them. Within a short amount of time, the preschool atmosphere became tranquil and the kids acted freely and confidently. In contrast, rigid limits stifle independence, self-expression, development and hands-on experiences, and promote a feeling of inability and insecurity.



## Socialization

For the child, an educational framework is a place to meet others and develop relationships with additional significant adults and especially with peers. This framework enables the child to fit in, be part of a group of kids, and undergo a socialization process so that he'll become a proper member of society. The adult's job is to provide the child with a space for social experiences – physical, emotional and cognitive. This occurs within “time zones” that aren't devoted to structured activity, but where the teacher can, and should, mediate and conceptualize social events and processes, and help the kids resolve conflicts and learn by having social experiences. It's important that the teacher know when to observe and when to intervene, and, of course, how to intervene. At the preschool level, the physical presence of the teacher is vital, be it passive, participatory or interventional.



## Play

Free play is essential at a preschool. It's where the children can be creative and use their imaginations, and where they formulate and set the game rules. The element of enjoyment in playing, as in life itself, is no less important: playing for the sake of playing and playing as a hands-on learning tool (Winnicott 1995). Playing is central to the activities at the preschool level and must constitute a substantial part of the children's daily routine. If they don't have a lot of playing time, they don't develop their creativity or imaginations, and they don't have a chance to deepen their social relationships.

When at least one of these elements (WLSSP) is missing or not sufficiently developed, the preschooler's proper development is hindered, as are his prospects of developing into a person who fulfills himself and contributes to society.



# The Preschool Level in the Urban Space

**P**reschool education constitutes the basis for the entire educational process. A city that wants to advance its educational system must start at the preschool level which is the critical age for proper human development. We suggest that the investment at the preschool level be channeled into furthering the democratic education approach, which, as we've said, will advance the kids toward self-fulfillment and make the society better and more humane. At the urban level, a substantial investment in quality education at the preschool level constitutes a source of attraction for young parents.

An advanced Education City will base its preschool education approach on WLSSP, and adapt the characteristics of democratic education at the preschool level to the individual, the peer group, and the society/environment as a whole.

After reading our description of the characteristics and essentials of democratic preschool education, the leaders of an Education City will ask themselves what urban work processes they must implement so that their preschool frameworks operate in this spirit.

We can break down this question into three aspects:

1. Who do we work with?
2. How do make the change?
3. What can be done in the city?



Peer Group



Parents/  
Community



Individual

## WHO DO WE WORK WITH IN IMPLEMENTING A PROCESS OF CHANGE IN URBAN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION?

### Action at the Individual Preschool Level

If we want to implement a process of change at a preschool, we have to work on three levels, as follows: the individual (teacher, aides); the peer group (the group of kids, the dynamics and relationships among them as a group); and the parents/community (the physical and human environment of the preschool itself, the community that surrounds the preschool and includes the parents as the main partners). To create a holistic, optimal change, we have to relate to these three aspects and teach the preschool staff to focus on all of them.

The following is an example of a preschool that underwent a process of holistic change:



**At the individual level:** The preschool staff underwent a training process with the aid of SML (Self-

managed Learning)<sup>3</sup>, and each staff member got to know himself and his colleagues better. Following the process, the staff decided to engage in group learning by means of PBL<sup>4</sup> (Project Based Learning), a process that enables each staff member to bring out his strengths and create a parallel process among the kids.



**At the peer group level:** The staff began working with the kids in order to involve them in the process of change it had initiated. The kids were full partners in implementing the change, working in learning groups and carrying out projects.



**At the parental and community level:** The parents were also involved in the process, giving support to the kids and acting as mentors and knowledge experts. They were also involved in preparing an evening during which the products of the various projects were presented. The community was also a partner in the process: the Education Ministry supervisor; fellow teachers who oversaw the process

3 SML (Self-managed Learning): A 5-stage method for implementing a personal learning process. The stages are: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where do I want to go? How will I get there? How will I know I've arrived? (Bennett, Ben, Cunningham, Ian & Dawes, Graham 2000).

4 PBL (Project Based Learning): This learning process is defined by the product it produces (which can be a tangible product such as a book or other object, or an event such as a panel discussion or theatrical production). It's the type of learning process that suits the progressive education approach since it involves creation and exploration, and the teacher serves as the process supervisor and facilitator.

and even learned from it; friends; and members of the extended family who came to the preschool and acted as mentors or experts at the staff's request. Some of the projects were implemented in the physical environment outside of the preschool (e.g. a community garden).

### Action at the Urban Level

The above rules, which we apply at the individual preschool level, are also applied when we enter urban intervention processes. We work on the same three levels, which suit the way in which we want the preschool teaching staff to work.

The work is done, first and foremost, with the individuals: the mayor, the Education Department head, the Preschool Department head, the supervisor, the teacher, the aide, and the parents. In working with the individual, we'll find where his strengths and interests lie; work on his dreams related to preschool education; work with him to formulate a vision for a joint future; and, especially, ascertain the primary task that guides him in everything he does for preschool education in the city. Based on the primary task, we'll formulate the work methods that will guide the change and the work in the field in the city.

At the same time, we work with the **peer group**: preschool teachers employed by the city; private preschool teachers; aides; teachers at daycare

centers; teachers in afternoon programs; and parents. During the guidance process, we'll try to create a group that learns and shares, i.e. a learning process for colleagues that creates a common language, a shared approach, and joint action for advancing the common goals that have been determined.

And when we want our intervention to be effective and felt throughout the city, we work with the various entities in the **community** and the preschool **environment**. Those are the organizations and people that interface with the educational staff in the various preschool-age settings: the preschool-age centers in the cities, including their paramedical teams; the community centers; governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor; the Ministry of Welfare; the Ministry of Health; third- and fourth-sector organizations that operate preschool-age programs; and, of course, the city parent councils. All of these parties deal with the preschool level in different ways, but their various activities interface with each other, and sometimes even overlap, but necessarily coordinated. Communication among all the parties and proper guidance of the city officials can lead the entire urban system to grow and make a significant change in the preschool education system in the city, and, at the same time, impact the future of the entire city.

## HOW DO YOU FACILITATE A CHANGE IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION?

In order to facilitate a change in preschool education, you must take the following preliminary steps:

- o **Map** the preschool-age system in the city, including the various entities that work in it, and get to know its complexities and the relationships among the entities
- o **Identify the various needs** of the system
- o **Define the primary task** for the field of preschool education in the city
- o **Define the change** you want to make in the field in the city in the context of the defined primary task
- o Formulate a **strategic educational plan** for carrying out the primary task, and **define the desired product**
- o **Put the plan into action**, starting with well defined pilots
- o **Develop an evaluation system** for examining the implementation of the plan.

In order to facilitate change at the preschool level, it is vital that you recruit the mayor and

ensure that he understands the importance of the endeavor, and, at the same time, recruit the head of the education department in the city and the head of the preschool education system in the city. Unless the powers-that-be have the same level of motivation, you cannot effect real change. I also believe that the change must reflect the spirit of democratic values, and all the entities within the system must undergo parallel processes if we want the change to take hold. Decisions must be made jointly, and the relationships among the various partners must be based on mutual respect and a genuine dialogue.

# What Actions Should We Take?

There are many examples of various actions we can take in order to facilitate the desired change. In each city, of course, we'll first characterize the primary task for the field of preschool education. Thus the change process will be fundamentally different from place to place, i.e. adapted to the particular task and various needs of each city.

## THE CASE OF HANATON

Here's an example of a change process we facilitated in the preschool education system at a "renewed kibbutz": a communal settlement whose population is a mix of old and new members – secular and religious Jews, with various cultural and social characteristics.

At the kibbutz we worked on the three levels:

1. At the **individual** level, we worked with the preschool education coordinator of the kibbutz and trained each teacher separately.
2. At the **peer group** level, we worked with the teachers as a group and also with the staffs of the preschools and daycare centers as a group.
3. At the **parental and community levels**, we worked closely with the education committee of the kibbutz and held several meetings with all the parents. We also worked with the head of the preschool education department of the regional council.

The work was carried out on all the levels at the same time. We worked with the education committee to map the needs and formulate a joint vision (a challenging task, considering the communal complexity and social/cultural diversity of the community). Based on the vision that we'd formulated, we determined the primary task and the ways of carrying it out.

At the same time, we gave the entire preschool education staff – from the coordinator down to



the caregivers – individual and group training, which included observation and professional development courses. After becoming familiar with the range of humanistic worldviews, the staff members underwent an in-depth process to become familiar with their shared educational worldview.

In addition to the above, the staff and the education committee met several times to discuss the evolving educational vision and how to realize it at the preschools.

There were also meetings with all the parents to discuss the educational vision and whether it's compatible with their own vision. The preschool education department head of the regional council was also a partner in the processes, and she supported and helped facilitate the change.

The process was exciting, and its byproduct (beyond a significant change that occurred in the preschool education system) was assistance to the community at large in adopting a common vision and common values, despite the diversity within it.

## **THE CASE OF BEERSHEBA: TEACHERS IMAGINE THE FUTURE... AND THEN REALIZE IT**

Over the past few decades, most Israeli cities have established Pisga centers – training centers for local educators. The director of Pisga Center in Beersheba, the capital of Israel's desert region, asked, "What would happen if, instead of training the teachers in programs developed by the Ministry of Education, they would take responsibility for their own future by developing their own teaching programs and determining the methods to be used in the local school system?" She did more than just ask the question; she put it into practice: She transformed the Pisga center from a conventional teacher training center into a Future Center<sup>5</sup>. This center invites educators to "invent the future" in a sharing, creative and structured process. A typical project at the center lasts about a year, starting with an in-depth community discourse that creates a "desirable goal for the future" in a specific area of education, and ending with implementation of the goal as a whole or in part.

One of the most interesting preschool education projects in Beersheba implemented by the

<sup>5</sup> A Future Center model is described in detail in a separate article published by the Knowledge Center for Education Cities.

Institute for Democratic Education was the one led by Yael Schwartzberg and Ron Dvir. They had a group of preschool teachers ask themselves, "How should a preschool look in the future so that it provides kids with the best conditions for developing their strengths?"

Their motto was taken from the Bible: "Teach each child in his own way."

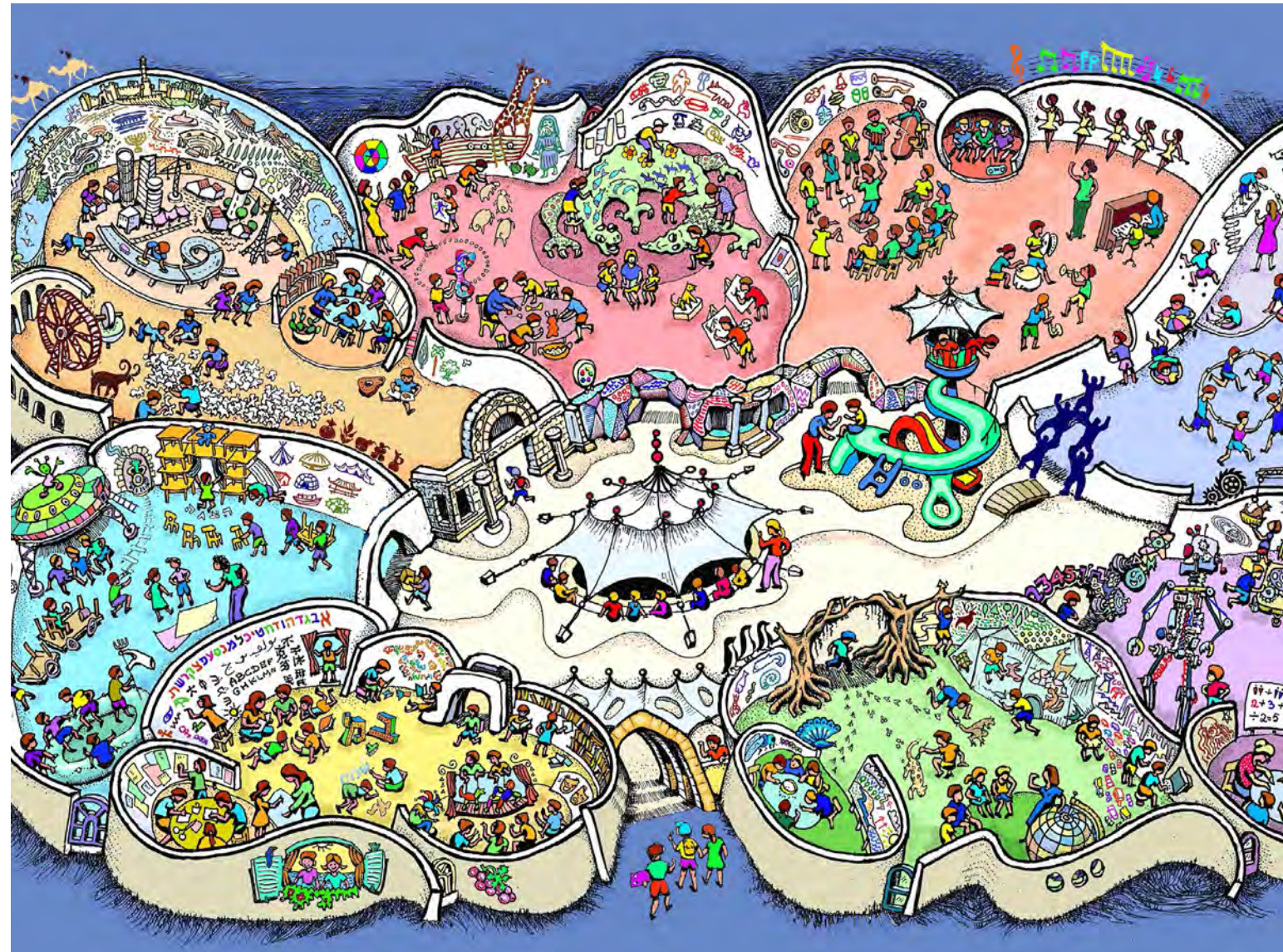
After researching many models being applied around the world, they developed a unique model called "Eshkol Haganim" ("Cluster of Preschools"). The idea is to have several preschools operate under one roof, each having a specific area of expertise that will be powerfully reflected in its appearance and activities. They thought of a cluster of eight preschools with the first one devoted to language, the second one devoted to the sciences, the third one devoted to the arts, the fourth one devoted to physical activity, etc. According to this model, the kids move among the preschools and are exposed to a range of subjects and learning environments. For some of the time, they stay with their homeroom class, which will spend, say, a month in the science preschool, and then move on to the next preschool.

The kids choose which preschools they want to attend and how many hours they want to spend at each one, basing their choices on their areas of strength.

The members of the community are invited to take part in the activities at the various preschools – each according to his or her area of expertise – and teach the kids voluntarily for several hours in each preschool.

The model of the future developed by the Beer-sheba preschool teachers is shown in the diagram below.

Here's how the future looks according to the preschool teachers of Beersheba<sup>6</sup>.



<sup>6</sup> The artist and architect Arye Dvir translate their vision into a Future Image drawing

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIONS AT THE INDIVIDUAL, PEER GROUP AND COMMUNITY LEVELS**

The following are several additional examples of steps that can be taken in order to facilitate processes of change in urban preschool education.

### **At the individual level:**

- o Training that is individualized and focused on gaining familiarity with strengths, and formulation of a program for action to be taken by the preschool education department head, the educational advisor, the preschool teacher (some of the training sessions will be based on observation).
- o Appointing a preschool division head whose main job will be to integrate and lead all the entities in the city that deal with the preschool level (birth to 6 years old).

### **At the peer group level:**

- o Pedagogical training in the democratic spirit for the preschool teaching staff.
- o Setting up various training programs (an incubator for educational entrepreneurship, preschool teachers in the spirit of democratic education, a school for aides, courses for the teachers in afternoon programs, courses for private preschool teachers and daycare teachers). Unique professional development courses and workshops in the spirit of democratic education: setting up an incubator for educational leadership/educational entrepreneurship among leading preschool teachers in the city. The incubator will put them through a unique process at the end of which they'll have to present a product that will be applied in the field of education in their city.
- o Developing unique programs for the private preschools in the city in order to bring about healthy communication and reciprocal relationships with the private preschools, even though they're not under the auspices of the municipality.

### **At the parental and community level:**

- o Establishing a city preschool education parents' committee in order to strengthen the ties and cooperation with the parents of preschoolers in the city.
- o Establishing preschool education centers where teaching staff, educational frameworks, medical teams, welfare staff and paramedical teams operate. This center provides much-needed assistance to kids who've been diagnosed with difficulties at a young age, but also normative kids can benefit from the various activities at these centers.
- o Establishing an urban preschool education steering committee consisting of representatives of all the organizations that deal with the preschoolers in the city; the purpose of the committee is to have the organizations join forces for the benefit of preschool education in the urban sphere.
- o A series of preschool education conferences that stress the educational variety that democratic preschool education has to offer. (Appendix No. 2: The Conference Program – Preschool Teachers Build the World of Tomorrow).

# Summary

**T**he article has provided the background for those who intend to facilitate change in urban preschool education in the democratic spirit. We have explained why such a change is worthy and indicated what steps are vital to its success.

Democratic preschool education is more suited to our era because it knows how to combine individual and collective values correctly and in a more balanced manner, providing room for self-development and lending importance to the evolving social processes. It also correctly combines freedom and openness, on the one hand, and the right amount of structure, constructivism and clear limits, on the other. The various characteristics of democratic preschool education will impact the individual in such a way that he'll get to know himself better, improve himself, and develop into a contributing member of society.

It's important that systemic educational changes be instituted at the preschool level because it's the age at which human beings develop many of the traits, habits and abilities they'll have as adults. Facilitating a systemic change as early as the preschool level (out of an understanding that it will continue at the higher levels as well) will lead to a significant change in the individual's

feeling of capability and well-being and the community's feeling of security and growth.

An urban change at the preschool level would be characterized by the same values, principles and trappings as a change that we would institute at an individual preschool. As in a micro process, a macro process would focus on three levels at the same time: the individual, the peer group, and the parents and community-at-large. It would also ensure optimal synchronization among the various parallel processes.

The Ministry of Education also plays a key role in bringing about a change as early as the preschool level. In this article, we're proposing that the municipality, of all entities, facilitate the change? Because we believe that it's easier for the municipality to do so. In most cases, it would do so with the support and assistance of the Ministry of Education, always bearing in mind the welfare of its residents and the progress of the city as a whole. I believe that, if a change is made by the municipality, it can eventually lead to a change at the national level, as well.





# Epilogue

## What a member of the second graduating class said at the twentieth anniversary party for Ran's Preschool...

So we're already 20 years old, eh? That's pretty old. A long time has gone by since I was a little boy at this preschool.

And yet, I had some of the best, most significant experiences of my life here. I made my first friend (who's still my best friend, and will surely remain so – Omer Gerber); I learned how to be part of a group; I learned who I connect with and who I don't; I learned how to say "please" and "thank you" (something that will help me in the future); I learned that helping a friend is a privilege, not an obligation, and that giving minor assistance, such as helping someone get up from the sand-box, can create a tremendous bond. I learned that it's worthwhile to relate to everyone nicely because then they relate to you in the same way (something we tend to forget these days), and not to judge someone by their appearance, but rather by their actions. Truthfully, here I learned everything I need to know in order to live my life the right way. At this preschool I absorbed some of the most basic values, and, even more importantly, some of the people who will always be part

of my life came from this preschool.

I really hope that the preschool continues to operate in the same way it did when I learned here. And based on the things I've heard from my little brother (Yuval Baker), Ran has put together an excellent staff that keeps the preschool filled with love. And, of course, you have to keep making Shabbat bread!!!

In short, I'm really glad I was here because this is an amazing community – and you should be glad, too! And keep celebrating it at great picnics like this one.

I hope that the preschool will continue operating as it has been; that's all it needs.

Noam, 2<sup>nd</sup> graduating class



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