

# ‘Sowing the seeds of community’: Daycare managers participating in a community approach project

Educational Management  
Administration & Leadership  
1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/1741143219873076

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## Abstract

This paper is based on a study of daycare center managers participating in a project aimed at changing the communal approach in early childhood education (ECE) centers. The project was implemented by the ECE system of Israel’s Association of Community Centers for ages birth to three, based on the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The study aimed at learning about the managers’ views and attitudes toward the project, expanding knowledge in the sphere of ECE management and proposing relevant methods for policy improvement. The study applied qualitative methodology and was based on in-depth interviews with managers who participated in the first year of the project, and on observations at the daycare centers and on the project’s implementation process. The findings reveal that the managers are influenced in various ways, by the complex economic and organizational reality of their workplace. The position of the daycare managers as responsible for both implementing the project’s policies and for managing the caregivers creates a complex identity informed by ambivalent attitudes toward the system and the project itself. As ECE for ages birth to three is a conspicuous subject on international public agendas, this study may help ECE policymakers improve education systems by developing solid communal policies.

## Keywords

Early childhood education, daycare managers, community building project, ecological systems theory, Israeli child care policy

## Introduction

This paper is based on a study of daycare managers in Israel who participated in a ‘community building’ project. The concept of ‘community building’ implies an intervention in the community that entails a social change. It aims at motivating people to cooperate in dealing with common challenges and with the efforts to improve community life (Shdemot, 2010<sup>1</sup>). The project was

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conducted in the framework of the 'Smart Start' early childhood education (ECE) system of the Israel Association of Community Centers (IACC). It was based on the ecological systems theory, which provides a basis for studying the relationships between individuals' contexts within communities and in the wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to this model, the community and the education system are perceived as reciprocally influential (Shdemot, 2010). The community building project, conducted through implementation meetings and in-service guidance, was affected by the basic difficulties of ECE (aged birth to three), in Israel (Achituv and Hertzog, 2018). The article seeks to elaborate on the daycare managers' position in the project and their perceptions and attitudes in relation to it.

The study applied a qualitative approach and included interviews with six daycare managers in the project implementation group.

The importance of the study emerges from three main perspectives. Firstly, since the majority of children worldwide are now being raised in the dual contexts of home and childcare centers (Corcoran et al., 2017), researchers, educators and the public at large need to understand the significant role of non-parental childcare in the international arena. Secondly, childcare centers are an important site of inquiry not only because of their implications for children's cognitive, social and emotional development, but also for their influence on parents, childcare providers and macro-social structures that shape daily life (Buchbinder et al., 2006). Thirdly, the study draws attention to the daycare managers' point of view, shedding light on a hardly studied population. Thus, the study illustrates an initiative of one organization trying to achieve higher-quality ECE.

The study's findings might help policymakers involved in improving ECE in Israel and elsewhere. Leaders of ECE training programs might use the findings as a reference while building training courses for daycare caregivers and managers.

The article is constructed as follows: the literary review discusses ECE systems and the theory underlying the community building process that is associated with ecological and community approaches. The research question and the methodology come next and are followed by the findings and a discussion. Finally, conclusions and proposals for further research are offered.

### *Early childhood education systems*

There is flourishing research suggesting that a high-quality childcare is associated with a variety of positive outcomes for young children (Elango et al., 2015; OECD, 2017). Chetty et al., (2010), for example, found a correlation between quality ECE and perseverance in school, higher education and income levels in adulthood (see also: OECD, 2017). Studies also show that investment in ECE is economically efficient (Moshel, 2014), especially regarding disadvantaged children (Elango et al., 2015; Moshel, 2015). There is a strong economic and social case for universal early years provision. High-quality ECE provision delivers a net financial return to the Treasury as well as better outcomes for children, families and society. Domeji and Klien (2012) pointed to the connection between daycare centers and increase in employment and improved economic viability in the subsidizing of early childhood daycare centers. Universal provision can also enable families to better balance work and caring responsibilities and, in so doing, help to promote higher employment rates. Work-life balance policies reduce gender inequalities by having a significant impact on employment and care choices for parents and on increasing women's participation in the workforce (OECD, 2017).

The circumstances under which young children are cared for have changed dramatically in recent decades through programs for children, following increasing numbers of infants and

toddlers being cared for in groups outside their homes for long periods of time (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006). Until the early 1990s, most OECD countries rarely intervened in the education and treatment of this age group and any educational frameworks for these ages were provided mainly by the private and third-sector markets. The 1990s marked a turning point in education policy for those aged three and under in the OECD countries: many countries, including Britain, France, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Spain implemented educational reforms for young children. Government funding for ECE frameworks has increased and the quality of education has improved through standard setting (number of toddlers in the group, the ratio of caregivers to children, training and professional development of staff, etc.), curriculum development, licensing and supervision. Today, more than half of the OECD countries have an integrated ECE system (OECD, 2017).

Israel's daycare policy is lagging behind most of the developed countries in quality indicators of treatment. In terms of structural measures of group size and the ratio between caregivers and children, the quality of the frameworks in Israel is among the lowest in the OECD. In terms of supervision and regulation of the preschool market, Israel did not join the trend in the developed countries of applying licensing and supervision to all frameworks, and today's private market education frameworks for children aged birth to three are not supervised (Moshel, 2015). An exception is the ECE in Israel's kibbutz society, which attributes great importance to ECE and sets a high level of quality regarding its educational frameworks. The kibbutz ECE system is based on stable, reliable and professional workforce maintaining a low child-caregiver ratio compared with other ECE Israeli systems, addressing the needs of high-quality care for preschool children (Gilat, 2017).

Several attempts were made to improve the quality of the structure and regulation of Israeli daycare centers in the past. Attempts to switch to a unified system of preschool education model, under the Ministry of Education, has failed and Israel's ECE system remains split between the Ministry of Welfare, in charge of education frameworks for children aged birth to three, and the Ministry of Education, in charge of frameworks for children aged three to six and beyond. Moreover, improvements to daycare centers recommended in a 2009 key report (Rosenthal, 2009) were never implemented (Achituv and Hertzog, 2018; Moshel, 2015).

Bush (2012: 3) argues that 'leadership is a key factor in making early childhood education successful', and yet studies examining ECE leaders find that becoming the director of a childcare program requires little or no formal education and that there is no compulsory national credential required from administrators of ECE programs (Dunlop, 2008; Mujis et al., 2004). Coleman et al. (2016: 766) argue that there is a 'relative lack of profile', which reflects 'the absence of any single, dominant career path'. A survey of 401 ECE leaders found that only 27% felt they were well prepared to handle the range of tasks required of them when they first assumed their administrative roles. Most of them were promoted to the administrative level from teaching positions and their classroom experience did not prepare them for leading and managing others (Bloom, 2015). Research relates to daycare managers as the 'gatekeepers to quality' (Sciaraffa, 2004) since their job includes many diverse areas: human resources, budget, pedagogy, adult education and staff development, families, outreach to community, communication, planning, and overall attention to internal and external values (Coleman et al., 2016; Hujala, 2004). According to Mujis et al. (2004) most of these roles can be described as focusing on maintenance rather than development. Hujala (2004) and Sims et al. (2018) found that daycare managers feel the tasks and duties connected to leadership are unclear and implicit, and they find it difficult 'to understand and fulfil the expectations held of them' (Sims et al., 2018: 961). ECE leaders were found to be reluctant to accept the

label of 'leader' and were even averse to the management aspects of the job, which are perceived as taking them away from their preferred status as educators (Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006).

The feminization of the education system, that is the predominance of women in this occupation (Resking and Russ, 1990), is a conspicuous phenomenon in Israel and in many other countries (Acker, 1994; Adi-Racah, 2002; Hertzog, 2010a; Griffiths, 2006; Hsiao-jung, 2014; Rahayani, 2010). However, this phenomenon has hardly been studied in the context of ECE. As in other female-predominant occupations, sex segregation is '...maintained by processes of exclusion, discrimination and differential allocation of status within occupation' (Harvey, 1978, cited in Rahayani, 2010: 18). Thus, Brunner and Grogan (2007) claimed that 'it is not the education but rather the society'. In a similar vein, Hertzog (2010b) argued that the situation of teachers in Israel (and elsewhere) reflects the situation of women in Israeli society in general and is not restricted to the education system. Nevertheless, although most of the teachers are women, most management positions, especially those in high schools, are occupied by men, and are being paid better (Hertzog, 2010b). The development of teaching as a 'feminine' occupation strengthens women's occupational isolation and collective weakness, thereby preserving the gender inequality. In the context of tender age, although 97.5% of the childcare workforce is female, much of the literature on ECE workforce has ignored the gender perspectives and hardly relates to feminist theories (Davis et al., 2015). Moreover, according to Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006: 13) much of the research on ECE has been based on 'men's experiences and male approaches'. Furthermore, most traditional leadership theories are not relevant to the field of ECE, as they reflect a hierarchical, top-down, male-oriented orientation, adopted from the business sphere (Dunlop, 2008; Kagan and Hallmark, 2001). The current study aspires to contribute also in this respect, highlighting the gender-blindness of women who are employed in a most 'feminine' space. Studying daycare managers' identity, Achituv and Hertzog (2018: 4) found that 'the female identity of daycare managers is an integral part of their identity, although they seem to be unaware of it'.

In what follows, the daycare managers' position in the 'community building' project, and their attitudes in relation to it, are examined by elaborating on the theory underlying the community building concept.

### *Ecological and community approaches*

The 'Smart Start' network's guide perceives the ecological systems theory as underlying children's education in its daycare centers (IACC, 2015). This ecological approach was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who coined the term 'ecology' in the context of human development. This approach implies that the children's development is influenced by the quality of the interaction between the physical, economic, social, emotional and cultural environment in which they grow, and their needs and abilities at a certain point in time (Stamopoulos, 2015). Families and communities play a central role and bear most of the costs of providing the supportive relationships and positive learning experiences that young children need for healthy development (Shonkoff, 2010). According to Campbell-Evans et al. (2014) there is work to be done in building infrastructure between school, family and community. Kagan and Hallmark (2001) emphasize that ECE leaders should see themselves as community leaders, through informing and constructing these relationships among families, services, resources and the public and private sectors. Their leadership role

lies in coordinating between the various actors, so that they work together to maximize opportunities for all children.

### *Community building*

Black and Hughes (2001) define community strength as the extent to which resources and processes within a community maintain and enhance both individual and collective wellbeing in ways consistent with the principles of equity, comprehensiveness, participation, self-reliance and social responsibility. The 'worthy community' is a social framework that realizes its potential, characterized by a high level of 'communal life'. According to Shdemot (2010: 24), 'the higher the level of communal life, the greater the sense of belonging, commitment, significance of individuals and groups in the community'.

Studies that discuss ecological and communal approaches with regard to ECE do not include the term 'community building'. This term was initially formulated by Shdemot (2010). It constituted the theoretical basis of the project led by IACC. The concept of 'community building' implies an intervention in the community that entails a social change. It aims at motivating people to cooperate in coping with common challenges and with the efforts to improve community life. Achieving this goal can be realized by active participation of all community members and agencies. By joining community initiatives, they are expected to contribute to making the community a source of social, political, economic and cultural support for all (Shdemot, 2010). Projects of community building strive to create social solidarity, strengthened by the cooperation of community members, working together and feeling part of the collective. This sense of belonging empowers the community members by reassuring them that they are not left aside, that others care about them and are there for them (Rubin and Rubin, 2001). According to Shdemot (2010), the concept of community building suggests that horizontal communication mechanisms engender sources of support and assistance. This kind of relationship encourages individuals in the community involved in social life and perceive themselves as valuable to others.

The 'community building' project combines the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the community approach and connects them to good quality ECE in a number of ways (IACC, 2015):

- The early experience of the child in his/her habitat has an important effect on her development. Parental influence is not exclusive. Adults or other children who are in regular contact with the child also have a significant impact on her development. Moreover, the community in which the child is being raised up has an impact on her development (Rosenthal et al., 2009).
- Western culture includes a lower parental presence than in the past, a retreat from the public sphere and a decline in solidarity. This can lead to feelings of alienation and loneliness in the future generation. Education from an early age, which emphasizes human relationships, may alleviate these processes (Aloni, 2013).
- Community support is likely to serve parents who struggle for their economic survival and simultaneously enable them to contribute to the community. It is assumed that more robust adults will produce more robust children (IACC, 2015).

The community building concept highlights the assumption that the community is a social unit with unique characteristics which provides a significant basis for dealing with social and cultural

challenges facing modern society. The community can contribute to strengthening the social fabric and to restoring people's belief in their ability to take real responsibility for their lives, their environment and their future in general. The community may be the basis for a new social solidarity (Shdemot, 2010).

According to the community building approach, the connection between the community and the daycare center takes place in three ways: 1. Community as a mode of action (and not a goal): organizations that choose community as a way of achieving broader goals; 2. Community as an arena of action. In this case, the community is perceived as one among various areas of action for implementing policies and promoting issues that are not exclusively essential to a particular community; 3. Community as a goal, referring to frameworks in which raising and cultivating community level are the main goal of the action (IACC, 2015; Shdemot, 2010).

The community building approach perceives the daycare manager as a leader, holding a key position in both the pedagogic and administrative contexts and as responsible for the atmosphere in the daycare center. She is perceived as responsible for the relationships with the parents and community agencies. Moreover, the daycare manager is expected to introduce changes and innovative activities into the center and to develop the team's skills. The managers are expected to represent educational leadership in interacting with the staff, the parents, the children and the community. These expectations correspond to distributive leadership approaches which 'can assist the implementation of leadership responsibilities by bringing about better interconnection, consistency and coherence in service delivery among diverse stakeholders' (Heikka et al., 2013: 39). Leading such processes involves understanding of emotional, social and communal issues. The daycare managers are expected to lead a social change which is based on the idea that 'education builds community and community builds education' (IACC, 2015: 28). It should be noted that the daycare managers' role is not explicitly described in the 'Community Building' documents, and hence, it appears that they do not provide significant operative means that are required for the expected change.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by elaborating on distributive leadership. Other studies stressed managers' preference to concentrate on educational content. Yet, although the interviewed managers, in our study, presented themselves as educational leaders, they showed no reservation relating to managerial work. Furthermore, they expressed their reluctance to reduce this part of their work, assuming that it was expected of them. One of the explanations offered for this finding suggests that the managers are worried because they feel that their positions depend on their managerial functioning.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on distributive leadership by focusing on tender-age education, a subject hardly discussed in the research. This paper discusses a case study of a project initiated by IACC aiming at distributive leadership in daycare centers as its main goal. The interviews with the centers' managers enabled them to voice their attitudes towards the project's expectations to adopt the distributive leadership model. Consequently, their reservations with regard to implementing the model were exposed. They seemed to prefer sticking to their administrative-authoritative position, probably because they were worried about the outcomes, a possible reduction in their control of the place and the situation. This is an innovative understanding that arises from the study, which contradicts various studies about managers of daycare centers who expressed their preference of pedagogical activity over managerial tasks.

The study also reveals the children's marginality in the project. Thus, this paper contributes to studies on education frameworks for children aged birth to three in Israel and abroad, by exposing the gap between rhetoric and practice in this context. Following the review of the relevant literature



the current study examined the following questions: How is the community building project perceived by the daycare managers? How do they perceive their position in the project and what are their attitudes toward it?

## Methodology

The methodological framework of this paper is based on the qualitative research approach of a multiple case study, which is 'a special effort to examine something having lots of cases, parts, or members . . . in diverse settings' (Stake, 2013: vi). The collection of those cases or the phenomenon that they represent may enrich our understanding of how the whole ('quintain') 'operates in different situations' (Stake, 2013: vi).

**Participants:** Six female daycare managers, out of sixteen, working at the Smart Start network participated in the community building project during 2016. Selecting the participating managers and deciding on their number was carried out in cooperation with the heads of the Smart Start program and the project's implementers. As this procedure took place prior to the beginning of the project implementation, the heads of the Smart Start project could not know in advance the participating managers' attitude toward the project. The managers were intentionally chosen from diverse geographic, religious and professional experience backgrounds: Jewish and Arab, younger and older, from villages and towns. The diversity of the daycare sites included in the project was adjusted to the socio-geographic reality in Israel (Table 1).

**Tools:** The study used in-depth interviews (Josselson, 2013) with each one of the study's six participants. The interviews took place in the managers' offices at the beginning of the implementation process at the beginning of 2016, and again at the end of the first year of the process at the end of 2016. Although the interviews were carried out in two different points of time, this paper is not interested in a comparison between these two periods, but rather in elaborating on the managers' perceptions as an outcome of one-year process.

**Analysis of findings:** All the interviews underwent content analysis according to Strauss and Corbin's approach (2015). Following this approach, we extracted three coding stages: The first brought out the meaningful categories. Key categories and subcategories were identified and the relationships between them were exposed in the delineating coding phase. The 'story' of the studied phenomenon was constructed in the selective coding stage.

**Table 1.** Participants' background variables.

Pseudonyms	Daycare location	Age	Seniority at work	Education
Keren	An average city in northern Israel	38	4	BA in Human Resources
Fauzia	An Arab village in the Galilee	38	8	BA in Communication
Shiri	A regional council in southern Israel	42	2	Parents and group facilitation courses
Liora		54	9	BA in Humanities
Yael	One small town in the center of Israel	56	22	Certified caregiver, Daycare managers' course
Shoshi		61	1	BA in Humanities

Ethical issues: The study was conducted according to procedures established by the MOFET Institute ethics committee: the participants received detailed and clear information about the purpose of the study. The study was conducted in a way that does not allow identification of the participants or their work place. The managers were not exposed to any risks due to participation in the study. All of them signed an informed consent form.

## Findings

The study discusses the community building project as described by the daycare managers. During the interviews the managers described diverse community activities that they carried out as part of the 'community building' project. These activities included staff meetings, parties and meetings with parents, parades throughout the city, a community recycling project, providing various instruments to young parents, and more. The managers' enthusiastic descriptions about the initiatives they carried out mainly suggest that these activities contributed to the daycare centers' image and status in the community. The findings relate to the daycare managers' understanding of the substance and aims of the community building project; the managers' views regarding their position in the project; and the managers' attitudes toward the project.

### *Sitting at a round table and not a rectangular one – Community building as perceived by the daycare managers*

The managers described the project's main idea in terms like 'partnership' and 'togetherness'. Thus, for example, the essence of community building is described by them as follows: 'The perception that we are all partners . . . we sit facing each other, at a rectangular table . . . to understand the deep meaning of "community building" is sitting at a round table' (Liora). The partnership principle includes the idea that initiatives for community activities must originate from the community, and the daycare center's role is to be 'the glue between people' (Shiri). The managers describe partnership and togetherness as accountability towards each other, thinking beyond each family's own child and 'seeing the other and how she is' (Shoshi). Against the background of a period characterized by individualism and loss of community, managers see the project's goal as to 'bring the community back to the community' (Yael).

In the past, you didn't have to mention it's a community because . . . that's the way you lived. Today we cling to our will to connect to people, and not to another computer and another WhatsApp . . . which is cold, but something human . . . what was once natural, needs to be created artificially (Shoshi).

While the 'community building' project aimed at encouraging the managers to develop communal orientation, in practice their actions revealed only negligible change in this regard. Relating to the project during the first series of interviews the managers described ambiguity and lack of clarity. While claiming that community innovations were part of their work before the project started, the managers suggested that they did not consider those innovations as community building. They expected the implementation team to provide clearer explanations on what they meant and claimed that, at the launch of the project, the implementation team itself didn't understand exactly what it involved: 'What is "community building"? It was missing a lot . . . maybe for them it wasn't too clear because it was the beginning' (Liora). Despite the ambiguity, the managers revealed that the project was perceived as an opportunity and as an instrument for positioning



themselves and their daycare centers, for purposes of marketing and improving their reputation. This emerges from statements such as: '... I do a lot of things thanks to this umbrella of being a "community building" daycare center... when I present the day center; this is one of the first things I say: "we are a community-building daycare center..."'

Trying to figure out the core of the community building project in its initial phase, the managers understood that it is a process they have to go through step by step. During the first series of interviews they employed different metaphors related to a journey to illustrate this, as it emerges from Liora's description: 'When will the process end?... When we get to the top... you have to climb mountains... predators you have to overcome... pits... to avoid on your way, but in the end, you'll get there.' It seems that, despite their doubts concerning the project's process, the managers feel that they can benefit from it and are willing to take the journey.

### *The managers' perspectives concerning their position in the project*

The daycare managers described their position in the project in terms of their self-identities, their role concept, and their relationships with the caregivers and the parents. Following are several examples, demonstrating these perspectives:

*The managers' personal and family identities as revealed in the project.* The managers' self-identity regarding their position in the project is expressed through personal characteristics they associate with communal life; through communal experiences they were involved with; and through the connection between the project and their personal and family life. Some managers describe their connection to the ideas of community building through their natural tendency to give and to help others: 'I believe in giving... that's how my personality is, and that's what I instill in my [own] children... that's why I was so connected to this project...' (Yael).

While connecting project ideas to communal events experienced by the managers in the past, they express their wish to recreate these events as part of their role in community building. Yael wishes to reproduce a communal parade she remembers from her childhood: 'The parade... it was something... I'm 57 years old... and my grandchildren are even bigger than me when it happened, and that's an experience I'd very much like to recreate. I'd like to do some kind of a parade.'

The managers describe connections between the project and their personal and family life either by relating to difficulties or to points of strength. Sometimes the project is perceived as taking place at the expense of personal life, as in Fauzia's case: 'I shared it with my family, but unfortunately, I didn't feel I was with them, that was the loss...' On other occasions, personal difficulties can lead to new insights due to project ideas as for Shoshi, who is struggling with her husband's illness: 'I myself see it now... we need each other and not only when suddenly there is a crisis... also when our life is serene, we still need to see the other... to be more empathetic.'

It seems that the managers' perceptions regarding their position in the project connect to their self-identities in two directions: sometimes they seek to recreate their past experiences through the project, and sometimes their participation in the project influences their attitudes towards their personal experiences.

*'Sowing the seeds of community' – managers' role concept.* The managers' understanding of the project's requirements to work in collaboration with partners changes their mindset regarding their role as managers to the extent that the role itself is questionable. This understanding emerges, for instance, from Liora's description:

In the community I place myself outside the role of the manager, because if we say: 'community building', I can't come to them from a place of a manager, because then it's not 'community building', because then I give a command . . . I impose an unpleasant task on them; I don't want to be there. So, if it's 'community building' it has to be clean: me as a person in a group.

Being involved in the project, the managers undergo a process, from being its initiator towards enabling it to happen. Hence, their job is mainly to join in. Keren says: 'I discovered that my job is not to do the community things . . . it's not my duty. My duty is to sow the seeds of community . . . It means not everything has to be concentrated in our hands.' This process is complicated for the managers since it requires them to relinquish some control. Keren confesses that 'this is a process you go through with yourself, to let go . . . and that means putting aside your ego . . . what directs me is the fact that I have neither a crown nor a gown'. The managers explain the process of 'letting go' in several ways: they feel that the project offers them an opportunity to find out how they feel as managers in the process. Another explanation points to the managers' worries that their intensive activity in the project would be interpreted as looking for their own benefit and not for the sake of the daycare center. Thus, for example, Keren says: 'I don't want to be seen as someone who does things for profit.' At the same time, they understand that, as managers, their beliefs about the project will influence the partners, as Shoshi suggests: 'If we believe in it, it will be easy for us to pass it on in the right way.'

*Managers' ambivalence: Sympathizing with the caregivers while criticizing them.* The managers experience ambivalence: they sympathize with the caregivers because of their working conditions and the extra burden that is put on them by the project. At the same time, they feel responsible for the project's success and therefore obliged to demand the caregivers' full devotion. Nevertheless, they hesitate to exert authority.

The managers express their sympathy with the caregivers and seem to understand the implications of the added tasks expected of them to fulfil within the project. Thus, Shoshi complains that they miss the enthusiasm towards it. She wonders: 'Where is the sparkle in their eyes?' According to the managers, it was difficult to recruit the caregivers to participate in the project partly because it included staying in the centers after working hours. Yael reports: 'We started with three caregivers . . . but it didn't last . . . they felt it's too much for them meeting after working hours.' Another explanation for the caregivers' lack of enthusiasm to participate in project activities relates to their working conditions. The managers seem to empathize with their situation. Shoshi says:

I understand it completely, to work six days, and the salary is low . . . everything together may have caused them not to want to participate . . . and if they did, I don't know how much it was with all their hearts or out of a sense of obligation.

As part of their empathy toward the caregivers, the managers refrain from forcing them to participate in the project activities. Yael explains: 'You can't force someone to do something she doesn't want to, perhaps I can force them, but that's exactly what it will look like.' Giving up their authority in this context might be seen as part of their efforts to 'let go' in their position as managers and 'put their ego aside', a challenge that is not always easy for them to meet. It appears that, although the managers strive to exercise authority, the caregivers' reservations and their awareness of the unfair employment conditions make it hard for them to exercise authority.

*'Sometimes the cow wants to nurse more than the calf wants to suckle' – Managers' role concept regarding parents' attitudes toward the project.* The managers claim that the parents are not really interested in the community building project. Liora, for example, states that 'The parents were not really enthusiastic . . . only two parents came to the meeting . . . each one of them with her own difficulties . . .' The parents justify their lack of enthusiasm by being too busy and having no time. The managers seem to accept the excuses as it is described by Liora: 'I have a group activity, my husband is in basketball . . . my husband works . . . you know, it's very legitimate.'

The managers are aware of the parents' intensive life style, perceiving it as an outcome of modern life. Yet, they also criticize the parents' disinterest. Yael complains: 'Sometimes I feel that what the public wants is: "Come on, take the child and give us a break, I'll come at five p.m. to take him."' Liora, too, criticizes parents' self-centered conduct: 'Today we live in a society which is very individualistic . . . and life leads us to: "I come from work, I'm with my cell phone, I take the child, I want a little bit for myself . . ."' The managers describe a situation in which they find themselves in need to put pressure on parents to join the project. They describe their efforts to convince the parents to join the project using nurturing metaphors and popular idioms. Liora explains: 'If you don't chew and serve the food or sometimes even swallow and serve the digested food . . .' Yael suggests that: 'Sometimes the cow wants to nurse more than the calf wants to suckle.'

It seems that the managers feel that unlike their relationships with their staff they fail to fulfil their role expectations with regard to their relationships with the parents. While trying, sometimes successfully, to construct shared leadership with their staff, their relationships with the parents appear to derive from a more alienated stance, perceiving the parents as outsiders who control their professional and personal reputation. The significance of this finding emerges from the fact that, while the managers assume that they are expected to cooperate with partners in the community, the parents in particular, they find it hard to implement it. Thus, it appears that there is a gap between the managers' statements about the need to collaborate with partners in the community and their difficulty in cooperating with the parents.

### *Managers' attitudes toward the project*

The findings show that the managers' attitudes toward the community building project were ambivalent and seemed to change along the period of implementation. In the early interviews the managers expressed their inclination to accomplish the project's objectives and their optimistic expectations. At the same time, they reveal frustration and skepticism. The second rounds of interviews carried out at the end of the year's activity reflected the managers' critical approach towards the project.

*'Every great dream begins with a small one' – Positive attitudes toward the project.* The managers share the expectation that the project will succeed. This success is perceived as depending on the collaboration of staff, parents and colleagues. Yael says: 'I really want it to succeed . . . we are together, so together we'll . . . carry it out.' Success is expressed mainly through the managers' descriptions of initiatives which they carried out. Fauzia says: 'It was very exciting . . . I didn't sleep at night . . . from joy . . . we really did something amazing.'

Carrying out large initiatives endows feelings of substantial success mainly because they serve to impress the community. Thus, for instance, Keren explains: 'It bounced my energy levels, warmed my heart in a crazy way. The community's response was for me something that . . . you

succeeded in something.’ Feelings of success combine caution with optimistic expectations with regard to the project’s development in the future, as put by Shoshi: ‘I hope it’s going to be OK . . . leading to something more positive, a greater interest in participating.’ Positive attitudes help managers believe in future success, as expressed by Yael: ‘I hope it’s going to be OK . . . I believe that every great dream begins with a small one, I hope we reach the big dream.’ This optimistic outlook is illustrated by Keren through a metaphor associated with gardening: ‘Look what happens to all the seeds you planted . . . some died along the way, some grew again, but were irrigated with water, now let these seeds grow and see where they lead.’ It seems that the optimistic view about the project is in line with the managers’ perceptions which reflect their willingness to undergo the process step by step.

*‘Something didn’t work’ – Negative attitudes toward the project.* While at the beginning of the project implementation the managers revealed positive and optimistic attitudes toward it, at the end of the year they developed a critical approach, relating to various issues: the responsibility placed on them, the project’s connection to ECE approach, the relationships with the community centers’ management, the latter’s attitude to the caregivers and their way of handling the budget.

One of the managers’ main concerns relates to their responsibility for the project’s success. In Shoshi’s words: ‘Actually everything falls on us.’ Being unfamiliar with the project, the managers feel frustrated, as it emerges from Liora’s statement: ‘Things aren’t moving, something in our messages as managers was wrong, something didn’t work.’ She describes how the hard feelings inflict on her position as a manager: ‘I suddenly stand as a reprimanded student . . . I’m taking this so hard . . . I cannot sleep at night because of that . . .’ These reactions highlight the managers’ ambivalence, trying to ‘let go’ in their role as managers, while understanding that they are expected to lead the project, being unconfident about how to do it.

It is interesting to note that, although the managers claimed that the project directors hardly relate to the children’s perspective, they also related to them only vaguely, as it stems from the interviews. The managers’ educational agenda does not seem to play a significant role in practice. Thus, for instance, Keren expresses criticism with regard to the children’s perspective as an outcome of the project implementation. She wondered: ‘What are you doing here? All day long you are just functioning as an organizer? Don’t you deal with the children? . . . Something is missing.’ Shiri goes as far as blaming the project for contradicting the child centered educational approach: ‘Who serves who? Because in the end, the one who needs to receive the service is the child . . . I feel it’s upside down, the hierarchy is on its head . . .’ Shiri’s disappointment with the project, with regard to the absence of the children’s perspective, implies inadvertently her acknowledgement of marginalizing this perspective herself (as the one who implements the project).

These findings are consistent with the observations described in our previous paper (Achituv and Hertzog, 2018), pointing to the gap between the managers’ rhetoric and actions. Analyzing the observations also revealed a lack of consistency between the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) approach (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009) that focuses on the children, as a key concept in ECE education, and the managers’ conduct. The gap between the DAP approach and the managers’ conduct was revealed on several occasions. One example is Shiri’s description of celebrations in her daycare, as adjusted to the children’s needs, while in practice a birthday party that took place in her daycare center was led by an outside performer, unfamiliar with the children, dressed in a full pink elephant costume, and who scared the children. Another example of this discrepancy is Yael’s claim that she refrains from working with templates whereas she was

observed using templates, ignoring the children's abilities. Yael insisted on encouraging the children's creativity in painting, but in practice she was observed as initiating and dictating most of the activity.

Another kind of the managers' criticism refers to the relationships with the community centers, to which the daycare centers belong. They express disappointment in the absence of cooperation with the community centers which are assumed to be the core of the project. This emerges from Keren's criticism: 'There is no collaboration among the branches . . . the community center and the daycare are not connected . . . the community center should have been involved in this project as well.' The disappointment is expressed especially by new managers, like Shiri, who expected to receive support from the community center in leading the project. She says: 'Those who were expected to give me support and spirit and hope, give me exactly the opposite.'

A conspicuous criticism toward the community centers' management raised by the managers relates to the treatment of the caregivers, in terms of their general working conditions and especially with regard to their implied exploitation in not paying them for the extra time they worked for the project. Shiri expresses openly her discomfort with the unethical conduct:

Not paying them for these hours? I said: 'I'm not starting the project' . . . I literally stood on my hind legs that it won't ever happen . . . it is very much about morality and community. It goes together. The social equality. In my eyes it's very communal to see the other.

Shoshi says, in a similar vein:

When we walk down the street and there is a beggar, we don't look at him, we keep walking because when we're not looking, we cannot see, so he doesn't exist as far as we're concerned . . . we direct ourselves not to see, so then he doesn't exist, but he exists.

Thus, it appears that the managers express a social approach, expecting the community centers' management to follow a more just policy, perceived by them as the core of the project.

Another kind of criticism toward the community centers' management refers to the projects' budget, for not allocating any funds for the project's implementation. Fauzia complains that: 'The project itself didn't have . . . any extra budget . . . everything is donations.' The managers found out that the project's budget was taken from activities that were considered as more important. Shiri explains: 'It took place at the expense of the managers' meetings . . . the encounters with (the educational facilitator) were diverted to the "community building" project.' This criticism, expressed mainly by new managers, suggests that they prefer having facilitation and team meetings with colleagues, which contribute more to their functioning. Keren's statement summarizes the managers' resistance toward the project: 'You have to take into account that you're not supposed to impose it, you're meant to bestow it . . . to see if the [manager] . . . is into it . . . it's not something you can force her . . .'

The project is perceived by the managers as a process which should develop according to their personal needs and possibilities. Although the managers play a central role in the project, as a group, they expect the project's management to consider their individual situation and let each one of them progress at her own pace.

Against the background of the growing research and awareness, and the increasing projects dealing with 'gender and education' we were surprised to find out that the interviewed daycare managers did not relate to the gender aspect in their work nor to the gender aspect in the project.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The study, on which this article is based, examined daycare managers' attitudes toward a community building project led by the IACC's ECE department. The concept of 'community building' was originally formulated by Shdemot (2010). It constituted the theoretical basis of the project led by IACC. Examining the project's documents, as described in the literature review, suggests that the daycare managers' role description does not refer to operative aspects. Consequently, the managers' functioning in the project was discussed mainly by relating to their practical experience, as described by them.

Elaborating on the interviews with the managers suggests that they assumed that they were expected by the project directors to develop a more distributive leadership (Heikka et al., 2013), that is, to work in collaboration with parents and agencies in the community. The managers revealed some hesitations in relating to this expectation, as they understood that they were expected to give up some of their authority. The findings expose the managers' tension, as a result of the gap between their role perception and their wish to stand up to the project directors' expectations. This tension entails, so they felt, an ongoing testing of their functioning.

The project directors' expectation that the managers develop a distributive leadership is in line with several studies that relate to this kind of leadership (Heikka et al., 2013). According to Waniganayake (2000, in Heikka et al., 2013: 38) distributed leadership in tender age 'provides one of the possibilities of achieving organizational cohesion through the integration' of administration, management and leadership 'under a single conceptual framework. However, the literature that discusses distributive leadership in tender-age education is limited (Heikka et al., 2013; Moshel and Berkovich, 2018; Sims et al., 2018). Thus, the study offers a valuable contribution, by expanding the research in this context, particularly with regard to the managers' reservations concerning the need or expectations to adopt distributive leadership.

The interviewed managers revealed reservations with regard to reducing organizational tasks which they assumed were expected of them as part of the project. This finding offers an innovative perspective with regard to daycare managers' perception of their managerial role. It seems to contradict previous studies (Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006), which found reluctance among ECE leaders to expand their organizational responsibilities. It is possible that the daycare managers, who are subject to the community centers' directors, are reluctant to reduce their authority, being afraid of weakening their position vis-a-vis these directors, most of whom are men. The daycare centers, which belong to the IACC and are administratively structured as a bureaucratic organization, are characterized by power relations (Hertzog, 1991) in which female ECE managers are subordinate to mainly male managers.

It appears that, although the managers who participated in this study seem to cling to management and administrative activities, they too tend to use a terminology associated with 'caring', especially with regard to the caregivers. This understanding points to the managers' affiliation with 'women's work' (Dunlop, 2008). Thus, it seems that the managers' position in daycare centers, working with small children and with other women, determine indirectly their gender role and status. In this feminine context the 'mothering' position (Rodd, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006) reflects the social gender structure in society at large and strengthens its gender power relations (Hertzog, 2010a). The fact that the daycare managers did not relate explicitly to gender aspects during the interviews is in line with the Achituv and Hertzog's claim (2018: 4) that 'the female identity of the daycare managers is an integral part of their identity, although they seem to be unaware of it'.



It is interesting to note that the managers talked extensively about their relationships with the caregivers, the parents and the community centers' managers, but very little about the children. This finding could be partially explained by the fact that the managers lack basic pedagogical training (Achituv and Hertzog, 2018). The project documents (IACC, 2015; Shdemot, 2010), combine between good-quality ECE and community building. Thus, the fact that the managers related to the children only marginally may indicate that the project leaders' intention to develop this connection did not reach the managers who are expected to implement it. The absence of practical instructions for implementation in this regard (as well as with regard to the community building concept) can also provide some explanation for failing to take into account the children's perspective.

The managers seem to be interested in developing their daycare centers. They identify with the system, trying their best to be loyal to its goals. Their performance takes place against the background of the complex relationships with partners in the community and with community centers' directors whose considerations are sometimes irrelevant. They perceive themselves as responsible for the caregivers, who are frustrated and lack motivation. Moreover, they have to cope with parents whom they perceive as self-centered and indifferent concerning what happens in the centers. The managers are trying hard to 'let go' of part of their management roles. However, they find out that the community centers' directors do not assume the leading of the project, as they expect them to do. The managers express bitter reservations toward the project and criticize the community centers' directors, for their lack of involvement in the project even though the centers are actually under their responsibility. Similar to Kagan's and Hallmark's (2001) description of ECE managers' role, the project seeks to ascribe the daycare managers with responsibility for the community's growth, for developing social networks within it and for connecting them to the daycare centers. However, in an era characterized by individualism and an essentially non-communal environment (Aloni, 2013; OECD, 2017), it seems as almost impossible for the managers to accomplish these expectations.

Examining the managers' perceptions regarding their role in the project raises three kinds of relationships between the community and the daycare vis-a-vis the community building approach (IACC, 2015; Shdemot, 2010): 'community as a mode of action', 'community as an arena of action' and 'community as a goal'. The managers put great efforts into managing the daycare in a way that will create a sense of belonging, commitment and significance for each individual, as well as trust and reciprocity, which are the main principles of 'community as a mode of action'. The initiatives described by the managers as part of the project are carried out in the community area, according to the 'community as an arena of action' principle. The managers often try to use the community as an arena of activity that contributes to the daycare by utilizing the community's assets, including human and social resources, for the benefit of the daycare staff and children. It seems that the managers have not reached the third principle, 'community as a goal', which perceives the community as the purpose of the daycare center's activity and defines its success. This high level of communalism, which entails trust, reciprocity and willingness of individuals to cooperate and contribute without expecting immediate reward (IACC, 2015), does not seem to be relevant to the managers' reality, as it stems from their descriptions.

The Smart Start ECE system's agenda is: 'Child first – motivated by a strong desire to do the utmost to discover the abilities and strength of the infants and toddlers in the daycare centers, their families and their communities, in a way that will affect their lives and shape their future' (IACC, 2015: 12). The Smart Start system combines the community approach to good quality ECE in a number of ways: the community contributes to child development; it serves as a substitute for the

diminishing time of parents with children and their educational impact in modern society; it provides for disadvantaged children, and enhances their integration into the community (Aloni, 2013; IACC, 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2009). Nevertheless, a major finding of the study revealed that the managers fail to combine community building concepts with ECE approaches. Hence, they experience the project's approach as disconnected to their educational understandings. Moreover, they feel that sometimes the project approach marginalizes the children's needs. This understanding contradicts community-oriented education, which requires that young children's attachment to community's values and culture should be connected to their immediate world, in order to develop their sense of belonging to their community (Plotnick and Eshel, 2008). The managers' doubts regarding the poor connection between community and ECE approaches expose problematic implications regarding the place of infants and toddlers in the project.

The Global Guidelines Assessment (GGA) in the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) published a systematic method for evaluating the quality of ECE programs through five content areas: 1. Environment and physical space; 2. Curriculum content and pedagogy; 3. EC educators and caregivers; 4. Partnerships with families and communities; and 5. Young children with special needs (ACEI, 2011). Similarly, according to OECD indicators on ECE and care (2017), the quality of ECE environments can be improved by six factors: 1. Low child-to-staff ratios and small group size; 2. Competitive wages and other benefits; 3. Reasonable schedule/workload; 4. Low staff turnover; 5. Good physical environment; 6. A competent and supportive daycare manager. These elements were also raised by the managers participating in the study as ones that can improve the standards of their daycare centers. Aiming at improving its daycare centers, the IACC aspires to provide good child-care quality which, so it is assumed, will produce significant outcomes for the young children attending them (Elango et al., 2015; OECD, 2017).

The IACC's efforts in improving ECE in their frameworks is salient on the background of the poor ECE situation in Israel (Achituv and Hertzog, 2018; Moshel, 2015). Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1979) and Shdemot's community building model (2010), the IACC chose to invest its resources in strengthening the interaction between the daycare center and the community. Thus, they left aside most of the indicators of ECE quality as stated by the ACEI (2011) and OECD (2017). The IACC relies on studies indicating that parental and community engagement is an increasingly important policy lever to enhance healthy child development and learning (OECD, 2017; Stamopoulos, 2015). Concentrating on one indicator as a basis for improving daycare quality while ignoring others raises the question regarding its potential contribution to daycare centers improvement. Nevertheless, the study suggests that the project had some significant contribution in terms of empowering the managers who participated in it.

This study described and analyzed a community project that aimed at raising the quality of ECE. It offered a novel perspective by elaborating on daycare managers' attitudes towards the project in which they were asked to participate. The community centers' management initiated and planned a project which the daycare managers were expected to carry out. Yet, despite the project's main principles regarding cooperation and partnership, they did not involve the managers in planning it. Ignoring the managers in this process offers some explanation to their reservations towards the project. It appears, therefore, that whether the 'community building' project's success had any impact on quality ECE is questionable: the role of the children in the project appeared to be marginal; no operative guiding instructions were provided by the project for practical use by the managers, who were expected to carry it out; and, as mentioned above, the managers were excluded from the project's planning. However, introducing the managers' voice through this

study acknowledges their experience and points of view. Moreover, bringing in the managers' perspectives into ECE projects generally and into community building projects especially, may contribute to improving the project's planning and implementation.

Comparing the managers' attitudes in two points in time, at the beginning of the one-year study and at the end of that year, indicates that they have developed a critical approach. While at the beginning of the research the managers expressed doubts arising from lack of understanding and anxiety, at the end of the year a critical tone emerged in their voices. The comparison also implies that during that year the managers revealed a certain degree of readiness to consider new ways of coping with daily tasks. Consequently, we propose that the main changes that took place in the managers' perceptions and behavior were in terms of increased self-confidence and critical approach towards the project and its heads. The study also brought up a gender original understanding regarding females' conventional roles. Unlike a widely assumed connection between women and 'feminine' (caring) roles, the daycare managers seemed to prefer managerial roles. This 'unfeminine' orientation was explained by the fact that the managers were concerned about the possibility of losing control and authority if their managerial roles had been reduced. Thus, the bureaucratic-hierarchical context may have endorsed their 'unfeminine' approach.

### **Recommendations**

The research recommendations apply to the 'community building' project specifically as well as to initiatives and community projects in ECE elsewhere: In planning, operating and promoting community projects, the professional skills and experience of the daycare managers leading these projects should be taken into consideration, and their voices should be listened to. Specific training related to community may contribute to their knowledge and professionalism. The connection between ECE community initiatives and the children's needs, in terms of planning, management and implementation, should be strengthened. The promotion of these projects should include the improvement of working conditions of caregivers. Follow-up studies of community projects should analyze the ideological and organizational discourse at the daycare centers, including caregivers, children and parents, management, and projects' implementation team.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the ECE system of the Israel association of community centers (IACC) ('Smart Start') for opening up the research field for us.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a MOFET Institute Scholarship no. 2015171 awarded to the author.

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## Notes

1. Shdemot is a center for Community Leadership at Oranim Academic College in Israel. Shdemot runs a model for building social capital and promoting social cohesion through community networks called 'community building'.

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