

New Culture Learning in the Day-Care Center*

Nancy L. Jacobs†

Director, Jewish Day Nursery, Cleveland, Ohio

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This paper discusses experience with fifteen Soviet children who are among the sixty children served at the Jewish Day Nursery of Cleveland, Ohio.

Jewish Day Nursery is the day-care center of the Jewish Children's Bureau. The service is grounded firmly in Judaic tradition and there is an atmosphere which offers the unique opportunity for a child to be simultaneously involved in a supportive ethnic surrounding while participating in a challenging learning environment.

At the time of intake all families receive an explanation of the religious aspect of the program. Kashruth is observed in the school so that all Jewish children can be comfortable. The joys of the Jewish holidays are experienced through Sabbath and other holiday celebrations. Jewish songs, dances, prayers over the food, and candles, books and records about Jewish holidays and Jewish life help children begin to experience the meaning of being Jewish.

The day-care center is supported by the Jewish Welfare Federation, the United Way, and parents' fees. There is a sliding scale of fees based on ability to pay. The intake is representative of the Jewish community in which the child will be living in the years to come.

The children are divided into four classes.

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Toronto, Canada, June 5, 1979.

† I would like to express deep appreciation to Mrs. Joyce Washington, teacher at J.D.N., and Mrs. Jean Cassel, volunteer, who contributed much to this paper in relation to the practical program in the classroom for the Soviet children. Their help was invaluable.

Three classes are heterogeneously grouped preschool children 3 to 4¾ years old. Two of these preschool classes have 17 children each and are each staffed with 2 professional early childhood teachers and a highly trained volunteer from the Big Sisters of the Council of Jewish Women. The third preschool class has 9 children (3 to 4¾) and is staffed by a professional early childhood teacher assisted part-time by an aide. The fourth class is a kindergarten for 17 children 5 to 6 years old. This class has an accredited kindergarten teacher who is assisted by a trained volunteer, and an aide as needed.

I will begin by defining culture, then I will discuss common feeling experience for immigrants and all people, and follow with a review of the historic role of day-care services to immigrant families. Lastly I will discuss seven basic concepts that we have found to be important in our work with all children, but especially immigrant children and with some comments about special services and details of our socialization program for the immigrant child including the role of the teacher, the volunteer and the interpreter.

Culture

Our definition for culture is "the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments, institutions of a given people in a given period." *New culture* refers to either the change or replacement of expectations in the present location or the change resulting from immigration to a new homeland. When we refer to *New Culture Learning* it is the learning of the many new concepts, rules and habits, etc. that are thrust upon the young child and his family when his parents come to this land.

Recently, on a visit to the home of a Russian

and the many changes he had endured. "It is hard for children to do new things just like parents," I said. "Do you remember how you felt when you first came here?" He answered, "Yes, I remember being afraid, and *I still am!*" This father's admission of fear is I'm sure similar to the feeling of all new immigrants in a new land.

Feelings of being isolated and frightened when starting something new are common to most people, and especially children. Those of us who have always lived in the same land and speak the native language find it hard to understand the extent of isolation and uprootedness that the immigrant experiences.

Social adjustment, the melting pot, cultural pluralism and assimilation are some of the bland terms that fail to convey the strongly felt pains and human responses to being new in a culture that differs from one's native land. New culture learning is difficult and often full of surprises for the teachers as well as the learner. In the play, *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, the United States army reformers who come to build a school to train the "ignorant peasants" remain to become appreciative of the other ancient culture.¹ They shed their own attire, wear robes, and, in their finest hour, they finally plot and aspire to build a lovely teahouse to honor the traditions of the community. In essence, they had learned a new set of rules and values, and, by combining them with their knowledge, had made a productive, valuable contribution to their society. Their new culture learning had resulted in rewards for both groups. Recently this happened in our own school when one of the teachers commented, "My throat was so sore yesterday and I've been thinking maybe the Russian families know something I don't when they say, 'Don't give my child cold drinks, it's bad for the throat.' I had a cold drink right after tennis, etc. etc." It's obvious that this teacher was learning new ideas to consider and that an exchange is never one way. Initially our teachers were frightened by

the formidable task of helping children to adjust to a new culture, but they have grown in their abilities and their level of expectations.

Last week a new Russian child came to our school for his second visit. When I commented to the teacher that I was pleased to see that he seemed more mature and ready this visit, she agreed, and then added, "He is still being fed by his mother but he'll soon learn to be independent. I'm sure he's going to do just fine once he feels comfortable with us." Then she added cheerfully, "He reminds me of Victor when he first came." When I asked what it was that reminded her of him, she said, "Oh, he was the one who put the cottage cheese in his ears the first day we ate lunch." Then she reassured me, "Don't worry, he'll be just fine." These certainly were the optimistic words of a teacher who accepted change and challenge.

Let's look for a moment at the historic role of day-care service in the life of the immigrant. In the middle eighteen-hundreds, day-care centers were established in the U.S. to nurture the children of working families and, quite often, immigrant families. These day-care centers were usually just one of the many services offered at the settlement house which was one of the chief sources for socialization for the new arrivals. "The popularity and rapid growth of the day nursery in the U.S. during the 1880s and 1890s was the result of two evolving factors. The social dislocations were caused on the one hand by the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the country, and on the other by a massive influx of immigrants."

This brought about a wholesale breakdown in the normal socialization process of the family, particularly in child-rearing.²

In 1880 Charles Loring Brace, a New York philanthropist and social worker referred to the immigrants as "the dangerous class." The "Americanization" of the immigrant child became a "mission" for reformers. Many

¹ Vern Sneider, *Teahouse of the August Moon*. New York: 1951.

² M.O. Steinfelds, *Who's Minding the Children?* (A History and Politics of Day-Care in America). New York: Simon & Shuster, 1973, p. 37.

the immigrants as "the dangerous class." The "Americanization" of the immigrant child became a "mission" for reformers. Many immigrant mothers had to work to support their families, so day-care centers were established to avoid institutional care for young children who needed to be cared for while the mother worked. Instead of the almshouse or the orphanage, the day-care center was thought to be more humane.³

Early reports show day nurseries in this country as being dedicated to fostering habits of cleanliness, order, obedience, industry, morality, and citizenship. Between the 1870s and the First World War, day-nurseries were developed on a large scale for the purpose of preserving and helping families. Often these centers served children two weeks old to six years old, provided emergency night care, offered the service of a visiting nurse, and held classes for mothers in sewing, cooking, English, and child-care.

"On a day-to-day level, the day-nursery's primary concern was physical care of the children—feeding, bathing them, and keeping them safe from the evils and danger of street and tenement. But most day nurseries expressed an equally strong concern for the moral care and proper upbringing of the child."⁴

During the early twentieth century immigration was heavy particularly from middle-European countries and Russia. It was at this time that the Jewish Day Nursery came into existence. The far-sighted Jewish ladies who founded the day-care center saw a great need for care for the children of Jewish immigrant families, as these families most often needed two bread winners to make a living in the new land. When they applied for the charter they were told that there was no need and that there were enough day-care centers in the community so that a special Jewish nursery wasn't necessary. They persisted, however, and in 1922 when they finally received their charter, they received 81 applications for 20 places within the first three weeks of opening.

³ *Ibid.* p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

During this time public policy toward day-care resulted in day nurseries providing health services, proper nutrition, a safe building and at last a modest educational program supervised by professional workers.

The quota system which became the Johnson Redd Act of 1924 caused immigration to slow considerably and day-care centers during this period were less in demand.

But internal migration from rural to urban areas and from south to north increased. During this period day-care centers served families in their readjustment to the expectations in their new surroundings.

By 1930 the day nursery was very much underfinanced and understaffed and the child-care services were for those who were only in greatest need.

In 1933 federal funds created day-care centers primarily to create jobs for unemployed teachers, nurses, etc. and for the next decade day-care played only a modest role in social service offerings.

With the threat of fascism in Europe, refugees began to flee to the United States and in 1941 the Lanham Act made federal grants available to day-care. This permitted mothers to work in the war effort and made available these services to refugee families from war torn countries.

The continuing attempts in the past three decades to Americanize the immigrant was the community's way of offering a new set of cultural values to these newcomers. The day-care center was one strong source of this knowledge. Today there is an increasing realization that a child learns well when value is placed on retaining a familiar social/cultural context in which he can learn.⁵ Therefore, today the day-care center has less of a mission to inculcate and more of a responsibility to strengthen and preserve family values and interpret ways of child development and upbringing with respect for each child's

⁵ Luis Laosa, "Socialization, Education & Continuity; The Importance of the Sociocultural Context", *Young Children*, Volume 32, No. 5 (July 1977), p. 21.

background.

Over the past 50 years, the Jewish Day Nursery has served children from all classes, economic groups and family life situations, and, although mostly Jewish, all faiths, races and nationalities are represented in the school and on the staff. In 1978/79, fifteen Jewish Russian children, three Israeli children, and one Hungarian child will have been among the sixty families served. All of the Russian children and their families spent the usual four months in Vienna or Rome on the way to Cleveland. It has been a long and stressful period for them.

Today, the Russian child enters the day-care center to find the same supports as did the children of refugees served before World War II, of displaced persons after world War II, of those who came after the Hungarian uprising, and of those who have come as temporary students from Israel.

There are basic concepts that form staff attitudes and behaviors which seem to serve all children well and give the immigrant child valuable support. Some of these concepts are almost "common sense", others are subtle and complex, and some are controversial.

First of all we believe that all children need time to master new relationships (some need more time than others). Initially we meet with all new parents individually and in the case of our Soviet parents, a Russian-speaking interpreter is present to assist them in understanding the program and in their orientation. Several brief visits are scheduled and the child's developmental history is obtained. At Jewish Day Nursery all parents are asked to support their children during an initial orientation to the school. For a child with English language ability, this period may be as short as five days or, for the Russian or Hebrew-speaking child, the orientation may last two to three weeks. By slowly phasing the child into the classroom and the school, he has time to master the steps to independence. In a visit to our school, one Russian three-year-old wisely looked ahead and said in Russian to his father, "I think I would like to take my nap on that cot, but I want a cot for (Grandma

Babushka too!"

The *second* concept is that we must be aware that a slow orientation period to school can be stressful when parents have many other commitments. Therefore, *the school needs to interpret to parents and employers the importance and eventual successful results of their help in this process.* In Russia and Israel, as in the United States, "cold turkey" separation is more often the rule than the exception. Many parents feel it is best to hurry away "before he gets used to me being here," or say, "I know he will just cry a little and get over it quickly." Our belief is that children will easily let parents leave when they are feeling safe, and that it is all right to express sad feelings when someone he loves goes away. We tell this to parents and if asked to, we will explain to a parent's employer how important it is for a child to get a good start because the result will be a parent who is a good employee—able to attend to work with peace of mind. We suggest that if parents can't come, a close relative or adult friend can substitute. As many Russian parents do not drive or have a car, they may, initially, come on the school bus, remain for the necessary time and be returned home once their child is feeling comfortable.

The *third* concept is that working parents have many other demands and priorities besides their children and parents adjusting from another culture feel a *continual* pressure. This added stress is sensed by the child who cannot completely understand the parents' anxiety. *Children may display their own worries in as many different ways as there are children. Confusion and/or withdrawal can result and can last for a full year. It can be followed by what appears to be a miraculous break-through* when, one day, the child who has said very little, begins to chatter away (in English) to a friend. It almost seems like he has been storing away important knowledge, piece-by-piece, until it suddenly comes together to flow into his understanding. Our teachers look for special ways to help the child learn about his new culture. Learning must be based on what he does know and has

observation without forcing participation can be a valuable process for the new child.

Alex, for one, said little, watched other children and followed their lead in a trance-like manner. He smiled rarely and played only with "safe" toys he had mastered before. Just as we were ready to reevaluate his development, recheck his hearing and ask our consultant for a review of his behavior, he began to smile, enter into play and be interested in all the activities. It seemed that he had spent his quiet time perfecting his skills for a "grand performance". We were his relieved, appreciative audience for the remainder of the year.

The *fourth* concept is that good communication is more than language facility in a quality day-care center. For the parent who once managed well in his native land, it is frustrating and frightening to be unable to convey important thoughts and concepts in the new language. He appears "simple" to himself, and knows that he is not always as able to help his child the way he wants to, or as he could have in his own country. This is difficult for a parent to accept as many immigrant parents tell me that they made the move for their children. With the help of Russian-English-speaking parents, a Russian-English-speaking aide, a Russian housekeeper, a Hungarian cook, and a Director not afraid to risk looking foolish—gesturing and smiling—we set a tone for communication. A newly arrived parent and child can begin to feel cared about and sincerely welcomed. Parents do often hesitate to speak to their children in English, for fear of teaching them wrongly or appearing stupid to their child. *We encourage parents to practice English at home with their children, but we encourage them also to retain and value the use of Russian language.* Some children refuse to speak Russian once they learn English, but teachers try to encourage the children to translate for a newly arrived child, and we show our respect by trying to learn and use the Russian and Hebrew words they teach us.

The fifth concept is that for all parents and children, the day-care center must be a

community as well as a school. It is our hope that the families served will feel that they are a part of what happens at school. We encourage them to come whenever they can, and we encourage families to get to know each other. We build a Sukkah together and many families help. Family dinner-time get-togethers in December (Hanukkah), February (Purim), and April (Passover), have emphasized the joys of Jewish holidays. The children participate by preparing the dessert and beverage and presenting the holiday program. During these visits, parents may also participate in a creative art activity with their child. For many Russian families, the lighting of candles and singing of songs of peace and faith in a group may be a first experience. It is most important to note that the religious program of our day-care center is a valuable support for the feeling of acceptance and community. A young child's feeling of acceptance and his family's willingness to risk themselves at learning new ways may depend upon how much they feel they belong and are valued for what they are and what they know. This has important connotations for appropriate attention to ethnicity in all schools and emphasizes the need for staff to have ethnic knowledge and sensitivity. To ensure the feeling of community and closeness other parent-staff communications take place in September, at a parent orientation meeting; in October, at a "What and How is Your Child Learning" meeting (where explanations are made in Russian as well as English); in November, February and May, when teachers have conferences with parents about their child's progress. (A teacher may meet a parent in the evening or go to the home if it is more convenient for the parent.) A bi-monthly newspaper keeps parents informed about special school activities, Jewish holiday stories and parenting ideas. Both parents and staff contribute to this literary effort. For the parent and child from another culture, school is a place where one begins to feel a sense of belonging and to experience the joy of being part of an accepting, respectful community.

The sixth concept we have observed is that

child-care and upbringing differs greatly from one culture to another and that respect for these differences must always be a consideration. The Russian parent who does not want us to give his child "cold milk" explains that in Russia, it is served at room temperature. The child who comes to school dressed for the "Russian heating system" is casually peeled from layers of garments when the parent sees that our rooms are comfortably heated. The four-year-old who has been helped to eat by mother or grandmother, models after other independent children and soon feeds himself. We assure his mother he is eating well. We know that, for the child, different foods take time to adjust to. Hamburgers may take longer than french fries. We have learned that ideas on ages for independence, toilet training and discipline are influenced by the native culture, and that parental attitudes in these matters go back to each parent's own early experience. It takes time to accept or reject other ways of upbringing. The staff model our culture's methods of child-care and try to explain them to the parents. As most Russian children travel to school by our bus, the parent conferences and family-child evenings take on even greater significance. In the classroom a Russian child brings his book written in Russian and beautifully illustrated. An Israeli child brings in an intriguing Israeli toy. There is much appreciation for each one. Everyone is worthwhile and important. New learning is always easier with accepting friends. In such an atmosphere, a child and his family can risk themselves to learn new ideas and new ways to do things. New skills will be achieved. They will have gained the ability to choose different methods while maintaining their cultural integrity and traditions.

The seventh concept is that the day-care center must work closely with other agencies to provide necessary services for all families. Consultation at Jewish Family Service, health care at Mt. Sinai Hospital, vocational guidance through Jewish Vocational Service, language classes and social activities at the Jewish Community Center are some of the many resources available for day-care fami-

lies. Referrals can be made by the administrator, or the family themselves, when informed of the services, will seek to make their own necessary contacts.

In summary, we have proposed some of the services that a day-care center can provide to support a young child and his family in a new culture learning experience, and we have identified seven underlying concepts that are basic to the directions and quality of these supportive services. These seven services are important to the success of the day-care center in helping a child and his family in new culture learning. We think they could be easily applied in other educational environments as well and with other groups of immigrant children.

Something more can be stated about some special services and details of the program in the socialization of the immigrant child. As mentioned above, we consider an asset that we are able to provide transportation for many of our families. In this way children can leave school after eight hours to go home to *babushka* or to an older sibling instead of having to remain for ten hours if mother and father must work long hours or come from afar.

There are some specific concerns around transportation in helping children come into the school. If school is new and frightening, so too is the bus. David, despite our careful orientation refused to get on the bus because it was the "red one" instead of the "brown one" (It had engine trouble that morning). He told his grandma, "I only want to go to Jewish Day Nursery and maybe the red bus won't take me there." This reenforced our awareness of the importance of consistency and detailed preparation for any change. The long working hours of many of our parents and the lack of easy transportation to school also compound the problem of many Soviet parents feeling that the school knows how to care for children and they should not interfere or be too involved. Unless we pursue the parents, it is easy for the school staff and parents to feel separated from each other. Therefore we work at encouraging parent participation whenever

easy for the school staff and parents to feel separated from each other. Therefore we work at encouraging parent participation whenever possible.

One of our teachers⁶ describes her initial work with the children in her classroom as a combination of body language and simple verbal instruction. If an interpreter (either another child or our own Russian-English-speaking aide) is available, the teacher may ask for assistance if she senses a child's confusion. In a warm and relaxed manner, she introduces the new child to the toys, allowing him to try them at his own pace. Very often the child will just sit and watch. When the child seems more ready she begins to make a more serious effort to integrate him into the group. This is done by seeing that other children invite him to join them or having him join a small group at a teacher-planned activity. She encourages him to bring something from home to show the children at group discussion time. If he knows no English he can just get up and show his treasures to the group. Very often children will bring their toys, Russian books, records, money, etc. At group time her concentration is on speaking clearly and slowly, using appropriate motions and props. For example, she uses the flannel board and the body parts figure "moveable Melvin" to help children learn the words to describe themselves. The Russian and English speaking children are mixed in the group and the classroom volunteer pays careful attention to see if each child really understands what is going on or is just taking cues from the other's actions. At story time, the child who doesn't understand English loves to help turn the pages and see the pictures up close, or if he doesn't yet have the patience he can sit with the volunteer and look at his own picturebook and learn the words for the pictures he points at. To encourage children in art activities, the teacher again relies on words and motions. Pointing and gesturing, she'll say, "Today we will finger

6 Joyce Washington, *Young Children*, "Socialization, Education, & Continuity; The Importance of the Sociocultural Context," Volume 32, No. 5 (July 1977), p. 21.

paint. We will need a smock so as not to get clothes dirty. Let's use red paint. It's all right to put your hands into this paint." Her words and motions and a soft reassuring voice soon produce a "creative artist."

Music is another pleasant way we introduce a Russian child to new words and concepts. Tapping, moving, singing to instruments or records can bring about better understanding of body parts, spatial concepts and numbers, and encourages social exchange. Language development is acquired by working in small groups. Concepts long/short, over/under, in/out are introduced. Rhyming games, and acting out familiar stories of repetition, such as "The Little Engine That Could," ("I think I can, I think I can, I thought I could") increases language facility and provides opportunities for dramatics resulting in new skills and enjoyment. She often uses puppets and colorful simply-illustrated story books. Our teachers have found that the use of an interpreter in the class has both plusses and minusses. It certainly can be comforting to the child to be reassured in the familiar language, and we do this if we sense that the child is worried or stressed. However, if the interpreter herself is not familiar with certain American concepts it can lead to more confusion. In Russia, teachers are expected to "instruct" whereas in the same situation we are more inclined to give choices or "suggest". Some of the teachers have concluded that they prefer that the child be spoken to only in English, unless there is an identified stress, because the child seems to respond in the language which is spoken to him. We are careful however to show our appreciation of the Russian language by praising children who interpret for us, by learning Russian words they teach us and by praising and respecting their efforts and progress in learning a new language.

One of our children was feeling very frightened toward the end of each day and we suggested that her mother and she make a tape together in which the mother reassures her daughter that she will always return for her and that she thinks of her often during the

wanted made it almost unnecessary to use. We are currently involved in taping some Russian songs and stories as well so that children can have some choices to hear their native language if they wish as a relief from the constant English expectation.

In a recent conversation with a Russian child my awkward attempts to phonetically communicate in Russian "Don't worry—Papa will be here soon" was suddenly realized by the somber, tearful child. She went from tears to giggles and even made me repeat it to another Russian child. Now she always seeks me out to talk with (her English has improved greatly), as she remembers my wish to help her and appreciated my attempts to risk myself just as she must often do.

Lastly I think it is very important that we document that the English-speaking children in our classes have learned many important concepts as a result of their experiences with the Soviet children.

1. They have learned to like and respect children who are different from themselves. They accept different dress and different languages. When Oleg wore his tight knit pants they came to recognize them not as pajamas but as the kind of pants that Russian

boys wear. They have also admired the large bows worn by some newly arrived Soviet girls. When Lenny brought a ruble to school, they came to realize that there are different kinds of currency as well as people, food, and dress.

2. They have increased their own understanding of historic happenings. When Jenny heard that the pilgrims in the Thanksgiving story came by boat to this land to seek freedom she quickly said, "Oh, now I understand—the Pilgrims came to find freedom just like Sasha did, but they came by boat and Sasha and his family came by plane."

3. All of the children have learned to have patience while a child tries to say something in his new language. Although we might think this would be frustrating, there is little unhappiness. One day I watched two Russian children, an Israeli child and an English-speaking child, none of whom could speak the others' languages, build a tall intricate building in the block corner. "The Tower of Babel" had not prevented their creating something beautiful together. And that is what is happening at our school. We are all building something beautiful together. As a result, each day there is more respect and openness and more and more flexibility on the part of us all.