The Portage Project in the Arab World

The Portage Project is a quality early intervention model designed to provide services to young children with disabilities from birth to six years of age in rural communities. It is an innovative programme which was implemented in the US before being introduced to the Arab world in 1984 in the Gaza strip, Palestine by the president of an NGO "Gaza Society for the Care of Handicapped", Dr. Hatem Abu Ghazaleh and Dr, David Shearer. The Portage materials were translated and around 400 home visitors were trained. In Gaza strip, 4500 children (handicapped and at risk) received services weekly. In 1992, it was adopted by the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, - ACCD and with finance from the Arab Gulf Programme for the Support of UN Development Organizations (AGFUND); it started implementing the programme in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.

Weekly home visits by home teachers train parents how to work successfully with their child to attain developmental milestones. In addition to providing direct home-based services to children and families, it also offers training and technical support to other programs serving young children and distributes materials to support quality early childhood programs (CESA 5, 2003).

The Portage Project is guided by the following four core values:
1. Strength-Based: a focus on the strengths of children, families, and programs;
2. Ecological: consideration of the larger environment in which children, families and programs exist;
3. Family Focused: families and programs are the decision makers;
4. Relationship Based: most effective work is through relationships based upon trust that supports each individual and forms the basis of the program implementation (CESA 5, 2003).
Feedback on the project noted that families were satisfied with the programme and the training methods. Though they had misgivings initially, they were surprised with the results as they played more with their children, and noticed that the children made progress. Goals are clear and have applicability. In addition, the project allows for work with cases of simple and moderate mental retardation.

On the other hand, parents and home visitors reported certain challenges. Home visitors need to be aware of the level of education of parents since parents’ role is that they take written notes. As for parents, it became apparent that they need encouragement to continue and to record activities. Other challenges had to do with the nature of the materials of the project. For example, many of the materials were translated into the Arabic language. However, the translations varied a lot and were more a direct translation without any attempts to arabize them. In addition, the cost of the full material package was expensive particularly when a larger number was needed.

Portage is known for early intervention and development of intervention systems in the community. Its success relies heavily on parental involvement in enhancing the development of young children with disabilities. More than 140 sites in the United States, and over 30 countries have implemented this model as a delivery system of quality early intervention services to children and their families.

More:

Susan J. Peters, “Review of marginalisation of people with disabilities in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan”, 2009. Available online at:

See also: Ron Barakat, Lisa Drylie, Jennifer Nash, “Running head: A model for early childhood education - The portage project: An overview of a model for early childhood education”. Available online at:
www.faculty.unlv.edu/jgelfer/ECE707/ThePortageProject(GROUP).doc