

Program teaches that key to excellence is breaking down pupils' mental barriers

'Michael' has taught over 200,000 students, with stellar results

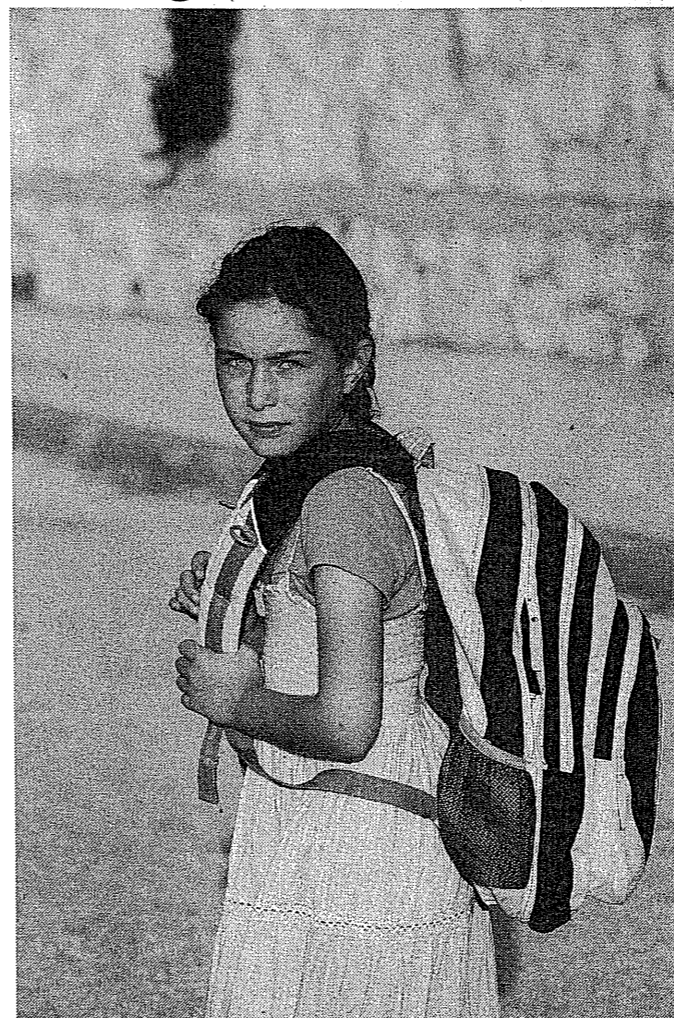
• By BEN HARTMAN

With the declining state of the country's education system making the news regularly, one organization is certain it has developed the tools to help students reach new horizons of academic and personal achievement.

The "Michael" program, which is now used for tens of thousands of students across the country, is driven by a simple thesis: Students, like most people, use only 5 to 7 percent of their mental potential. Through their lectures and classes, Michael instructors try to find ways to expand the amount of such potential that students utilize, by working to break down the mental hurdles built up in their minds in school and elsewhere.

Michael – an acronym in Hebrew for "finding personal talents for excellence" – was developed by a broad group of Israeli academics in 1988 and, through the support of the Education Ministry, has now taught over 200,000 students, with some 15,000 enrolled in the program this year. The program is operated in the Arab and Jewish sector, as well as in the religious and secular schools. It teaches the same curriculum in all the systems.

While skeptics might scoff at the program's approach, a study conducted by Michael found that 74% of students enrolled in it achieved a matriculation certificate – more than double the percentage among the general



CHILDREN, and adults, just need to believe they have the ability to succeed. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

student population.

The study also found that there was no correlation between the success of students in the Michael program and the level of education of their parents.

Michael chairman Menny Barzilai sees the program's success as a direct result of its

straightforward approach.

"The difference between Michael and all other educational programs in the world is that it is the only program whose goal is to develop excellence in students, but without requiring an entrance exam," he said. "This is because we believe

that anyone can succeed, and that the only difference between a successful student and one who isn't has nothing to do with some innate set of abilities they were born with, or not. The difference is only in what they do with themselves."

Barzilai added that unlike most educational systems in the world, Michael devotes itself to developing the individual's potential and encouraging creativity, which he said is the key to success for students and adults.

The program runs for four months, with students meeting once a week for four hours. At its heart is a system of positive reinforcement, building confidence in students that they can thrive in subjects they have always told themselves, or been told, they were bad at.

According to Barzilai, the low cost of the program is one of the reasons it has gained the interest of countries around the world.

"We have made initial connections with a number of countries, including Brazil, Russia and Bulgaria, where we have already run a pilot program," he said. "We have also received some inquiries from South Korea, which is already considered to have the finest school system in the world."

Yisrael Shiran, a longtime lecturer in the Michael program, agreed that the key to success in school was for students to find their own abilities and the means to develop and expand them, with the

confidence that there were no limits on what they could accomplish.

"Each person can do much more than they realize or think that they can. They just need to be made to believe in themselves, to believe that they have the ability," Shiran said.

Shiran, who worked as an administrator in the Education Ministry, said that in the personal awareness portion, teachers encourage students that they can succeed in fields where they for some reason or another never believed they could.

"We aren't great teachers of mathematics; what we do is get students away from the roadblock in their heads that tells them they're bad at math and just can't succeed at it. Once we teach them to believe in themselves, their awareness and their attitude changes. They can become great at math, or even tutors at math."

According to Shiran, "Once they realize it's possible, the sky is the limit."

The father of three boys, including two who have already been through the program, Shiran said he appreciated the potential of the program – not just as one of its teachers, but also as a parent.

"Michael is not only a course for students or for coaching, it's for life in general," he said. "It's a mixture of tools and awareness – a house with Michael in it is far different than one that doesn't have it."