YOUTH DROPOUTS IN ISRAEL AND THEIR TREATMENT IN THE YOUTH ADVANCEMENT UNITS

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Abstract

The phenomenon of youth dropout from the formal education system is a well-known phenomenon in Israel and the world and is considered one of the major factors nourishing and preserving social gaps. The reasons for dropping out are divided into personal, family, pedagogical, and community reasons. Different countries vary in the way they measure the extent of the phenomenon. In Israel a student is defined as a dropout if he stopped attending school during the year or in the transition to the next year. In Israeli society, the ultra-orthodox, Arabs, and immigrants (particularly the Ethiopian community) demonstrate the highest levels of dropping out. In order to deal with this phenomenon, the Youth Advancement Department in the Ministry of Education operates 170 Youth Advancement Units. The services offered to youth dropouts include completion of formal education, vocational training, preparation for the world of work, leadership development, and more.

Keywords: dropout youth, dropping out, youth advancement, socio-educational work

Introduction

Some argue that all adolescents are on a continuum of risk. The dramatic changes occurring in this era, along with the complex task of forming a self-identity and social pressures, often create among adolescents a sense that they lack control of their situation, which arouses anxiety, depression, helplessness, and distress. These situations can arouse a desire for a mental escape through abusive substances, such as alcohol and drugs, which may cause violent, aggressive behaviors, externalized sexual behavior, eating disorders, or self-harm (Kaim & Romi, 2015). Nonetheless, one must distinguish between risks that are faced by all youths and youths at risk. The term "youths at risk" refers to the population of

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youths that is at a physical, psychological, or spiritual risk (Lahav, 2000). The term has numerous variations, including "street gangs", "detached youth", "marginal youth", "maladjusted youth", and "dropout youth" (Etzion & Romi, 2015). The numerous, varied definitions depend upon the social conception adopted by the defining organization; however, the common denominator of all the definitions is youths who have difficulties functioning in educational and social contexts, which leads them to dropping out from the normative path (Romi, 2007). Youths leave the education system prior to the end of their formal studies for various reasons. Sometimes this happens willfully, due to the need to go to work and help sustain the family, but for the most part the system pushes the student out of the school (Lahav, 2012).

Youths dropping out from the formal education system are a well-known phenomenon in the world and in Israel and are considered one of the major factors that nourishes and preserves social gaps. Dropping out is a complex phenomenon that is affected by four main factors: (1) factors relating to the youth's personality, including low educational achievements for an extended period of time, learning disabilities, behavior and discipline problems, frequent absences, low self-esteem, an unclear conception of the future, problems in interpersonal communication, use of psychoactive substances, social alienation, social isolation, involvement in delinquent, criminal behavior, a feeling of alienation from the educational setting and the environment; (2) factors relating to the family, including low socio-economic status of the family, parents' low level of education, parents' difficulties in communicating with the establishment, a criminal family, lack of boundaries, lack of support and expectations, a single-parent family, families in crisis, immigration crisis; (3) factors related to the relationship between the youth and the school, including low expectations on the part of the school, incompatible curricula, low quality of instruction, low efficacy of the school staff in dealing with student diversity, lack of academic support, lack of communication between the parents and the school; (4) factors related to the community such as lack of community support for the parents, lack of a sense of belonging to the community, lack of treatment and mediation elements, stigmatized, criminal neighborhood (Lahav, 2013; Vininger, 2014).

One must be wary of definitions that rely only on the dropout's personality or family structure; rather, dropping out must be attributed also to social factors and to the effect of structured inequality, which affects not only direct dropping out from school but also variables such as overall welfare, poverty, or health, which constitute some of the sources of dropping out (De Witte *et al.*, 2013).

In recent decades there have been numerous attempts by researchers and policy makers around the world to define the variables affecting inequality in education and to attribute academic achievement to the schools' or the students' socio-economic status (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). Students from low socio-economic status families have the highest probability of dropping out of high school. These students lose their chance to acquire an education and also tend to delinquency

and unemployment and thereby feed the circle of discrimination (Cohen-Navot, Frankowitz, & Rinefeld, 2001). Poverty is manifested not only in the lack of financial resources; its deeper significance lies in the lack of proper functioning on the part of the parents, who are in a perpetual state of survival and hence neglect their children. This neglect is manifested in deficient nutrition, lack of proper healthcare, lack of academic support, lack of parental involvement in school, lack of boundaries and of emotional containment, and an inability to present a significant educational role model. This creates in the child low academic motivation, lack of perseverance, low effort in school, unavailability for studying, negative behaviors in school, detention, suspension and, ultimately, dropping out (Wergen, 2009).

The overall socio-economic background of the school also affects educational achievement. The effect is primarily on the quality of the school climate. Schools that operate in communities experiencing a high level of environmental pressure due to poverty, crime, and other social problems fail to establish a supportive and safe school environment, which harms the students' academic abilities (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017) Schools are not isolated from their surroundings; they are part of the community, and planned activities of the community enable it to promote educational needs by establishing social relationships as a source for expanding knowledge, constructing community databases, helping weakened populations (e.g., tutoring), and establishing the school as a leading community focal point (Lewis & Lockheed, 2007). In the opposite situation, populations that are excluded from the community and the school are usually ethnic, religious, or gender minorities. These groups will feel alienated from the school and consequently their children will fail and dropout. This happens because exclusion of minority groups strengthens the alternate group identity that rejects the values of the majority and exploits exclusion to strengthen their group identity. The resulting dynamic deepens the exclusion and further limits the possibilities of social mobility through education. The excluded youths adopt a pattern of self-defeating behavior and reject education as a primary symbol of the culture of the oppressive majority; expectations are lowered, leading to academic failure and dropping out. Exclusion weakens the parents' desire to struggle to keep the child in school, which they view as a primary source of exclusion and discrimination (Lewis & Lockheed, 2007).

It is customary to distinguish between overt and hidden dropping out. Overt dropping out is a situation of physical disengagement of the youth from the formal, age-appropriate educational system. Hidden dropping out refers to frequent absences from school, a passive presence in class, a lack of significant learning and low academic motivation (Vininger, 2015). Early departure from school without acquiring a formal diploma creates a weakened class in society and the labor market. This affects not only the individual but society in its entirety. Today, employees need at least a high school diploma in order to compete and find a place in the labor market, so that youths who dropout have a very difficult time finding stable, rewarding work. Developmentally, youths who dropout lack in the

emotional, cognitive, functional, and social development required of adults in order to lead a normative life. It has been proven that youths who did not complete their formal studies required more assistance and welfare, lived in poverty, were unemployed for lengthy periods of time, involved in criminal activities, frequently in and out of prison, suffered from impaired health, and led complex family lives, with their children dropping out too (Lyche, 2010).

The definition of dropping out in the world

Throughout the world different definitions of dropping out are used so that it is difficult to compare the data of different countries on this subject. For instance, Iceland defines dropping out as the ratio of the number of youths in a cohort, those who are in the school system to those who did not complete the required diploma or graduated without a diploma (Lyche, 2010). On the other hand, Finland and the UK define dropping out according to the NEET concept, i.e., those that are Not in any Education, Employment or Training program. Furthermore, comparing OECD data regarding dropping out is fraught with difficulties since the countries vary in the length of the secondary-school program. Thus, in some countries the program can be completed two years after the formal conclusion of studies, while other countries do not have this option. Also, the programs differ greatly among themselves: some are academic and aim for higher education, others focus on vocational training or a combination of work and studies (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Lyche, 2010).

The education system in Israel and student dropping out

The education system in Israel includes formal and informal education. Formal education consists of levels: pre-school (ages 3-6), elementary (6-12), junior high school (13-15), and high school (16-18), followed by higher education. Informal education includes studying and enrichment beyond school hours, activities in the various youth and children organizations, extra-curricular activities, and adult education. The Israel education system operates several main systems that include the state-religious, the ultra-orthodox, and the Arab educational systems, with the latter encompassing four sectors: Arab, Druze, Circassian, and Bedouin. The structure and content of studies in each system is adapted to the language, culture, and religion of each (Azulay *et al.*, 2013). At the conclusion of 2016, Israel had 2.042 million Jewish children (71.6%), 722 thousand Arab children (25.3%) and another 88 thousand children classified as "other" (3.1%). The elementary and high school system encompassed 1.714 million students, of which 712.9 thousand were in the high school system (72.4% in Jewish education, 27.6% in the Arab system) (CBS, 2017a).

Youth dropouts in Israel are characterized as having difficulties in adapting to school or as not accepting authority, with low self-esteem, a lack of self-efficacy, and learning disabilities. They exhibit a wide range of marginal behaviors including alcohol and drug abuse and involvement in criminal and delinquent activities. Many of these youths live in low socio-economic status families, experience severe economic hardship, or come from single-parent families, families in which only one parent is functioning (due to illness, a chronic disability, unemployment, or criminal activity), especially large families, immigrant families, or weakened families where they are exposed to violence, sexual abuse, and neglect (Cohen-Navot *et al.*, 2001; Etzion & Romi, 2015; Lahav, 2004).

There are two main ways to measure overt dropping out in the Israeli education system: The first is based on comparing the number of students in the beginning of the year to the number of those continuing their studies the following year; the second counts all those attending school in a cohort and those not attending are considered dropouts. This method measures the accumulated level of dropouts, which is also termed "the rate of non-learners" (Vininger, 2014). The Central Bureau of Statistics (2017b) defines a dropout as a student who left school during the 2015/16 school year or in the transition to the 2016/2017 school year. Students who left during the 2016-17 school year and returned the following year, students who left school but spent over 100 consecutive days abroad, and students who transferred to another school are not considered dropouts.

Table 1: Students grades 7-12 who dropped out of the Israeli education system in 2016 (CBS, 2017b).

	Total no. of students who began studying in 2016 in schools supervised by the Ministry of Education	Total no. of students that dropped out during 2016 and in the transition to 2017	Dropping-out rate (%)
No. of students (total)	1,699,492	27,599	1.6
Grades 1-6 (total)	898,961	7,208	0.8
Boys	459,869	3,827	0.8
Girls	439,092	3,381	0.8
Grades 7-12 (total)	800,531	20,391	2.5
Boys	405,551	14,989	3.7
Girls	394,980	5,402	1.4
Jewish education Grades 7-12	585,588	12,839	2.2
Arab education Grades 7-12	214,943	7,552	3.5

The majority of youth dropping out in Israel occurs in the ultra-orthodox, immigrant (particularly Ethiopian), and Arab communities.

Dropping out in the ultra-orthodox community

The ultra-orthodox community in Israel is comprised of various, differing groups and factions, which all share a total Jewish-religious belief, extreme implementation of the religion's commandments, comprehensive social control of all aspects of living, Torah study as a paramount value for men, community-wide seclusion spiritually and physically, distinct and rigid visual characteristics, total adherence to the community's unique educational system, and a clear, prefigured educational path (Gal, 2015). The members of the ultra-orthodox community usually live in geographic "ghettos" in their own neighborhoods and towns, which distinguish them from modern Western culture. This society is characterized by a high birth rate, poverty, and a low standard of living. The ultra-orthodox education system is gender separated. Education for boys begins at the age of three, when they start learning how to read. Learning concentrates almost entirely on holy studies, which are conducted at a very high level. The education system for girls is more similar to the secular education system and serves as preparation for the labor market (Shpigel, 2011). The ultra-orthodox education system has almost no educational settings for mediocre or weak students and no response for students who have educational, personal, or family problems. Youths that find it difficult to adjust to the demanding, rigid system find themselves outside of it. For ultra-orthodox youths, dropping out means not only leaving the school setting; it also entails dropping out of the religion, in spirit and in faith, which leads directly to dropping out of affiliation with the family and the community. The community's condemnation leads these youths into extreme risk behaviors, including vagrancy, substance abuse, indiscriminate, risky sexual behavior, sexual vulnerability, and theft and delinquency (Yogev, 2012).

Immigrant youth dropouts

The inability of immigrant youths to adapt and integrate into Israeli society is a severe and painful problem. Immigrant youths have a higher rate of dropping out, of substance abuse, and deviant behavior, compared to native Israeli youths. These problems have a number of sources, including cultural and mental differences between immigrant and Israeli youths, insensitivity of the absorbing systems, the immigration crisis, the weakening of the parents' status and authority, and problems in immigrant youths' identity formation, not to mention the fact that they are experiencing adolescence, which is a difficult, turbulent time for youths in general. The dropping out rates, overt and hidden, are highest among Ethiopian youths and their academic achievements the lowest by a significant degree compared to the rest of the population and even other immigrant groups (Worku-

Mangisto & Horenczyk, 2018). The Jewish-Ethiopian community hails from rural, traditional, closed communities, which for the most part subsisted on agriculture and handicrafts, with very few of them having any contact with the Western world. Family structure was patriarchal with very few options for education. Thus, the gap between Israeli and Ethiopian culture is very large. This, along with their black skin color, created difficulties in the absorption process (Rosenblum, Goldblatt, & Moin, 2008; Shechory & Ben David, 2012). Many do not participate steadily in the labor market and thus lack financial, economic, and social resources. Many parents still do not speak Hebrew and find it difficult to communicate with government offices, including the education system (Shechory & Ben David, 2012).

Youth dropouts in Arab society

Arabs are the largest minority in Israel, differing in nationality, religion, ethnicity, and language. Arab Israelis amount to 1.62 million people, which are 20% of the population. Arab society is comprised of various religious and ethnic groups, which include Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouin, and Circassians (Ramsees, 2013). Most Arab citizens live in homogenous, peripheral towns that have low socio-economic status: 53.3% of Arab families suffer from poverty and 28% have large families. The level of education among Arabs is changing, rising from a 7% high-school graduation rate in the 1960s to 50% today. Nonetheless, rates of education in Arab society are still lower than in Jewish society (Hadj-Yahia, 2017), and the dropout rates are higher than among Jews, which can be attributed to the dearth of services provided for students with difficulties and the lack of alternative settings (vocational and technological), low level of education of the parents and their lack of involvement in school life, alongside family problems, mostly related to their economic situation—thus many of the students who dropout do so to help their parents make a living (Cohen-Navot *et al.*, 2001). The highest rates of dropping out are found among Bedouin youths. This has numerous sources, many of which are related to the traditional tribal structure of this society alongside the absence of proper study infrastructure such as few schools, too many students in each class, a low level of studying, an absence of transportation infrastructure to and from schools, and an absence of resources for helping and supporting students. Dropping-out rates are even higher among Bedouin girls due to the absence of gender separation in schools: Many parents refuse to send their daughters to coeducational settings for reasons anchored in religion and tradition (Hoz *et al.*, 2000; MJB, 2017).

The treatment of youth dropouts in Israel by the Youth Advancement Unit

The first formal call to establish services for youth dropouts in Israel was issued as early as the middle of the 1940s. After the establishment of the State of Israel and until the end of the 1960s, the reigning conception was that not all youths need to study and that those who found themselves out of the system would find their place in other social or employment systems. However, following significant social and political unrest accompanied by protests, fingers were pointed at the Ministry of Education, which was then tasked with taking responsibility for the youths who dropped out. Accordingly, Youth Advancement Units began to operate in the local authorities. Their operating concept was based on the need to establish a socio-educational system to address the problems and needs of the dropout population (Lahav, 1992). The Youth Advancement Service, acting as part of the Advancement of Youth-at-Risk Section of the Ministry of Education, currently encompasses fifteen-thousand youths who are on the continuum from "hidden dropping out" to "overt dropping out" and are defined as "detached youths", meaning youths who have dropped out of the education system and are not in any alternative setting. About 70% of the treated youths are boys and the rest are girls. There are 170 Youth Advancements Units in Israel, operating as part of the educational services provided by the local authorities and encompassing all the populations in Israel: from native Israelis to immigrants, Ultra-Orthodox, Religious-Zionists, Arabs, Bedouins, and Druze (Ministry of Education, 2017). *Figure 1* presents the distribution of the treated population by sector.
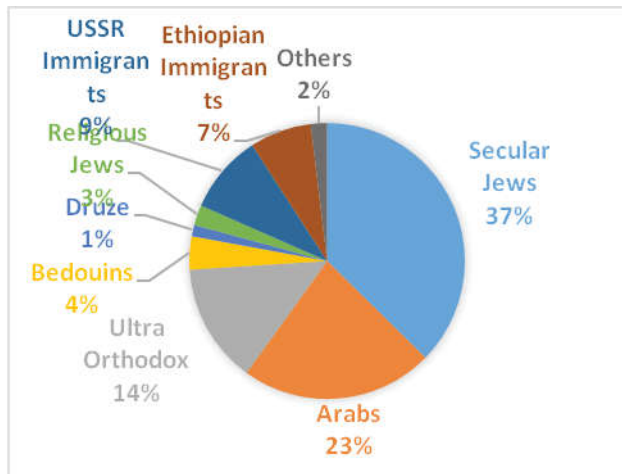
Figure 1. Distribution of the treated population by ethnicity (N=15,000)

The work of the Youth Advancement Units is inspired by various disciplines and is based on the multi-system intervention approach, which combines professional approaches that were developed in the field of education with approaches developed in the social-work field and other behavioral sciences, and called "Socio-Educational Work". The goals of youth advancement activities include reintegrating the detached youths into normative activities, compensating and promoting detached youths who do not re-integrate, fulfilling personal potential, and preventing alienation and detachment (Lahav, 2011). Throughout the years, unique, diverse interventions have been developed in the Youth Advancement Units, aimed at bolstering the youths' abilities and realizing their powers. These interventions are multi-dimensional and adapted to the entire life circle of the youths' treated in the units. Thus, they relate to academics, employment, leisure, culture, the peer groups, family, and the community as a whole (Lahav & Shemesh, 2003). The first interaction between youth dropouts and the Youth Advancement Unit occurs in their meeting with the socio-educator worker who serves as their case manager and accompanies them throughout their entire sojourn in the unit.

In the last decades of the 20th century a fundamental developed took place in the professionalization of the workers of the youth advancement units. This development is a result of the expansion of scientific and professional knowledge (Sela-Shayovitz, 2015). A survey conducted in 2013 (Shemesh & Lahav, 2013) found that 95% of the units' workers had an academic education in fields such as education, special education, social work, behavioral sciences, educational counseling, art therapy, as well as graduates of dedicated tracks for working with at-risk youths, which operate in some academic college of education in Israel.

The socio-educational work of the Youth Advancement Units is based on the construction of an individual intervention program for each youth, which functions as a personally tailored suit that is adapted to the unique needs and goals of each youth. An intake process takes place to get to know the youths, during which information is gathered about the youths, dialog and coordination is initiated with other elements treating the youths, their strengths and abilities are identified, goals and objectives are set, and they are integrated into the unit's programs and activities. These activities include completing their education, preparing them for the world of employment, preparing them for meaningful service in the army or national service, and reducing risky behaviors through prevention programs and empowerment, programs that promote involvement in the community and volunteering, and work with sports, arts, and outdoor challenges (Herts, 2018).

Completing education and preparation for the world of employment as an example of a major program in the Youth Advancement Units

There is broad agreement that youths dropouts require a unique program that is suited to their individual needs. This approach is based on the understanding that education is a key component in socio-economic mobility and optimal integration in society, particularly in the case of youth dropouts, whose dropping out has caused difficulties in integration, social exclusion, poverty, and distress. In 1989 the Israeli government expanded the law of (compulsory) free education to include youths who dropped out of the system, thereby enabling them to complete their education in the educational centers operated by the Youth Advancement Units. In 2009 the law was expanded to include the 12th grade. This enabled the centers of education to become unique frameworks in which youths dropouts could fully complete their education (Himi, 2014). The education program is based on several main principles such as (1) socio-educational interventions must be combined with an instructional program that grants the youths formal certificates recognized by the Ministry of Education; (2) Beyond being a means of bestowing knowledge and enrichment and expanding one's personal-cultural capital, education is also a means of therapy, as it supports development and maturation processes and can restore youths to the normative context of their peer group. This in turn reduces risk behaviors, while academic successes create experiences that strengthen their self-efficacy and contribute to the formation of their identity and self-image; (3) The program is constructed according to the "tailormade principle", i.e., it is adapted to the abilities of the youths and their pace of progress; (4) The teachers in the program undergo training to work with youth dropouts, including learning strategies for the learning disabled, small-group instruction, and project based learning (Herts, 2018; Himi , 2014). The academic tracks include completion of 10, 11, and 12 years of schooling, tracks for partial or full matriculation, technological tracks, as well as unique programs that prepare them for the world of work, experiencing community and social involvement, music or arts and vocational training courses such as cell-phone repair, beauty care, cooking, gardening, carpentry, photography and so on (ATID Education and Schools Network, 2018).

Regarding employment, preparing youth dropouts for the employment world is based on several assumptions. The employment world is one of the integration tracks for youth dropouts. According to data, about 70% of treated youth are in the work world due to basic existence or social needs. Through integration into the work world it is possible to develop a broad range of personal, emotional, social, and functional skills in youth. It constitutes an additional setting in which youth can evaluate their skills and abilities, and experience success. The employment world integrates effectively with formal and vocational education and it is an alternative to risk behaviors and their prevention. Experience in the employment

world from an early age allows youths to be exposed to various professions, to familiarize themselves with them and examine their suitability, and promotes their occupational aspirations (Arkin & Lahav, 2013).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the phenomenon of youth dropping out from formal education is familiar in Israel and throughout the world. It is caused by personal, family, school, and community factors. The measurement of the extent of the phenomenon depends on definitions that vary by country. In Israel youth dropouts are defined as those who left the education system during the school year or in the transition to the following year. The highest rates of dropping out in Israel are found among the ultra-orthodox population, immigrants (especially among Ethiopian Jews) and the Arab-Bedouin population. In order to treat youth dropouts, the Ministry of Education has the Advancement of Youth-at-Risk Section, which operates Youth Advancement Units that are stationed throughout the country. The treatment in these units include personal accompaniment of a socio-educational worker and integration in programs such as education completion, preparation for the world of work, social activities and volunteering, sports and arts. The ultimate significance of the Youth Advancement Units lies in their being a home and a last resort for youth dropouts in their quest to re-integrate into society and the peer group—to create for each and every youth dropout new possibilities and opportunities for realizing their potential in their personal areas of excellence and interest. At the same time, the units aim to deepen the level of responsibility and commitment of Israeli society toward these youths by placing their unique needs on the public agenda at the community, municipal, and national level.

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