

Integrating and Advancing Children of Asylum Seekers in the Israeli Education System

Recommendations, December 2020

Introduction

“The Israeli education system promotes inclusion and integration of all students... The perception of inclusion in Israel has named the integration of students with special needs a value... The meaning of containing each student in need of special attention, tailored to their personal needs is the narrowing down of gaps, granting every child equal opportunity and improving the Israeli society in general.”¹

Last year, ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel and The Garden Library have conducted a mapping of the needs and challenges faced by children of asylum seekers in the state education system in Tel Aviv, as a case study for their situation in other parts of the country. The information, data and conclusions gathered by the organizations were assembled in a 2019 report ([Children of asylum seekers in Israel: mapping of key educational issues and needs](#))² and are based on a series of interviews conducted with education, welfare and healthcare professionals as well as the professional experience of The Garden Library and ASSAF teams.

[The 2019 report](#) states that children of asylum seekers who attend state preschools and elementary schools suffer from severe developmental and academic gaps, language delays, behavioral issues and emotional difficulties. These gaps and delays are, among other reasons, the result of the time the children spend in unsupervised nurseries (“Babysitters”) and their life circumstances in Israel - without formal status, most children and their families live in poverty, with limited access to social services and healthcare, in survival mode, and in the shadows of their experiences as refugees. Their teachers face severe challenges on a daily basis without proper training and resources.

The report aimed to initiate conversation about suitable solutions for this complex situation. It was distributed to professionals in the education field, activists who work with asylum seekers and officials in Tel Aviv Municipality. The abstract of the report was presented to various audiences.³

¹ Inclusion and integration in elementary schools: **Implementation of Amendment of The Special Needs Education Law, Inclusion and Integration, The Ministry of Education, Pedagogic Administration (2019)** https://meyda.education.gov.il/files/PortalShaar/integration_binder_elementary_school.pdf

² ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel and The Garden Library, **Asylum Seeking Children in Israel - Main Issues and Challenges in Education (2019)** <http://assaf.org.il/he/sites/default/files/Children%20of%20asylum%20seekers%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dec%202019.pdf>

³ For example, a lecture given during a seminar at The Mofet Institute <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QKuptvCR0b5yWteNO83zaRZtr8mSOcGK/view>

The current document aims to follow up on the report and suggest practical solutions for the integration and advancement of children of asylum seekers in the Israeli education system. It calls for a new pedagogic model to be developed and implemented, which can act as guidelines for the integration of children of asylum seekers in existing educational institutions in the cities, alongside their Israeli peers, while at the same time addressing their specific needs.

The integration of these children will not only benefit them and their communities, but the Israeli children and the entire Israeli society as well, since containing children with various needs will teach their peers tolerance and solidarity, and will grant them the skills to succeed in a socially, culturally and ethnically diverse environment in the future.

The Israeli education system is taking steps toward the integration and inclusion of all its students: children and teens at risk, children with special needs, new immigrants, etc.⁴ Integration and inclusion present a challenge, but alongside the challenge there lies an opportunity to establish a cohesive and diverse society, untouched by prejudice, exclusion and racism. It is time that children of asylum seekers are part of this important process.

The recommendations suggested here by ASSAF and The Garden Library are based on research conducted in Israel and the world, interviews conducted by the teams of both organizations with leading professionals in the education sector and the valued opinion of Dr. Marcelo Weksler.⁵

These are our recommendations:

- 1. Integration and Inclusion** - The integration of children of asylum seekers in existing educational institutions attended by their Israeli peers is essential in order to address the developmental and academic gaps they face, and consequently, keep them in school.
- 2. Study support** - In light of the severe gaps, waiting for full integration to take place is not an option. The children must receive extra study support in the segregated institutions they attend as pupils.
- 3. Increasing supervision of nurseries for ages 0-3 years** - many unsupervised nurseries for children of asylum seekers put the children's health and development, and lives, at risk. They must be better supervised.

⁴ For example, the PACT program for the advancement of children immigrants from Ethiopia and their parents. Please see research report: **Myers - JDC - Brookdale Institute PACT and PACT+ for Advancement of Children Immigrants from Ethiopia and Their Parents project assessment (2012)**
<https://www.thejoint.org.il/digital-library>

⁵ **M. Weksler, Pedagogic Opinion on Integration of Asylum Seeking Children in state preschools and elementary schools (2020)**; Dr. Marcelo Weksler is an education professional, specializing in education of children and teens at risk, lecturer at Seminar Hakibbutzim College and pedagogic counselor to education teams and directors of educational organizations
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RoIDNMzkUTC0RoBLxX0LBmb3E_f1A-hDIPx9Fck2BFY/edit

A. Integration and Inclusion of Children of asylum seekers in the Israeli Education System

The right to education is an elementary right in Israel, as is the right to equality in education.⁶ Discrimination in education is prohibited by power of Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, guaranteeing the right to dignity and equality for every person, by power of court rulings, The Students' Rights Law and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in Products, Services and Access to Public Places and Places of Entertainment⁷, and under The Convention on The Rights of a Child, signed and ratified by Israel.

Article 2 of the Convention states that:

“States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.”⁸

Segregation in education is prohibited by Israeli law as a form of discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin.

Segregated is Unequal:

“Legitimizing segregation in education based on the children's state of origin and legal status is unprecedented in the West and we will not lend our hand to it. These children did nothing wrong by coming to Israel... The Ministry of Education must take care of them under the responsibility cast upon it by the law and by the responsibility that the State of Israel embraced as party to the International Convention on The Rights of a Child.”⁹

In spite of the law and court rulings, segregation of children asylum seekers in preschools and elementary schools is still practiced in some parts of Israel.¹⁰

Segregation makes it harder for children of asylum seekers to learn Hebrew quickly and to a good standard, by communicating with their peers who are native speakers, making it harder for them to close developmental and academic gaps. Segregation also increases their parents' feeling of alienation, harming the parents' involvement in their children's education, which in

⁶ HCJ 5373/08 [Abu Lebada vs The Minister of Education](#) (6.2.11), HCJ [Tabake Justice for Immigrants from Ethiopia vs The Minister of Education](#) (31.8.10), petition 29883-07-11 [Atosh Majed Manjan vs Municipality of Eilat](#) (2.8.2012) (see court ruling)

⁷ [The Students' Rights Law, The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in Products, Services and Access to Public Places and Places of Entertainment, 2000](#)

⁸ [The Convention on The Rights of a Child](#)

⁹ Atosh Ruling, Footnote 6, article 49; an appeal to the Supreme Court was served and rejected after the parties reached agreement on the integration of children of asylum seekers in the municipal education system <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1807940>

¹⁰ For example preschools and schools in Tel Aviv and preschools in Petach Tikva, please see petitions served against the Petach Tikva Municipality and The Ministry of Education <http://assaf.org.il/he/content/education-petah-tikva>

turn damages the children's motivation to succeed. Segregation also places the children at increased risk of dropping out of the education system and adopting dangerous behaviors. In addition, it leaves them exposed to racism directed at them in public spaces without proper care from the Ministry of Education. The segregation deepens the gaps between the two groups of children, leaving children of asylum seekers behind, and increasing their feeling of alienation from the place that most of them were born in. Segregation keeps children of asylum seekers marginalized and in poverty.¹¹

Research from around the world shows that investment in systematically working towards social cohesion between refugees and the local population with mutual efforts made by both communities encourages successful processes of integration and inclusion.¹² Both the hosting population and the refugee community benefit from successful integration of the refugees into a new culture, while maintaining their personal identity.

The composition of the student population in an educational institution has a major influence on the quality of the education that the institution provides. This is known as the "Peer Group Effect".¹³ Education begins with conversation, hence the level of education in a class rises when the group includes curious, motivated students with cultural capital and high abilities. The integration of students from different social and economic backgrounds can improve the results for the disadvantaged students. Integration is also the best way to ensure that disadvantaged populations have good teachers and budgets, since research shows that schools with high achieving students from families of means tend to attract better teachers.¹⁴ In addition, children who come from educated, financially balanced families, tend to get more involved in school, and this benefits all children.

Integration in educational institutions plays an important part in overcoming the consequences of segregation. According to Weksler,¹⁵ only integration and inclusion of children of asylum seekers by the state educational institutions attended by Israeli pupils will enable the former to narrow down the gaps and to handle the many challenges they face. The integration of children of asylum seekers will ease the language barrier and close the academic gaps, increase their parents' involvement in their education, strengthen their communities, and decrease their feeling of alienation and their risk of dropping out of school.¹⁶

The integration of children of asylum seekers into educational institutions attended by Israeli children will also be good for children of local Israelis. In a multicultural, diverse world, the

¹¹ Weksler, footnote 5

¹² J. Phillimore, Implementing integration in the UK: lessons for integration theory, policy and practice

¹³ Harel Ben Shahr "Equalisation in Education", court ruling 117 (2017)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/18OUWGtW855GYS8hYZLPTJY8X9WXSioBo/view?usp=sharing>

¹⁴ H. G. Peske & K. Haycock A report: Teaching Inequality: "How Poor and Minority Students Are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality" The Education Trust (2006) <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494820.pdf>

¹⁵ Footnote 5

¹⁶ Integration might also support the integration of children of asylum seekers in the non-formal education. Global research shows that after school activities hold great value for the integration and development of children of asylum seekers. Participating in after school activities contributes to their understanding of local culture, sense of belonging, initiation of social connections and higher self esteem. See: **Promoting Social Inclusion through Sport for Refugee-Background Youth in Australia: Analysing Different Participation Models**, Block, Karen; Gibbs, Lisa. Social Inclusion; Lisbon Vol. 5, Iss. 2, (2017): 91-100. DOI: 10.17645/si.v5i2.903 https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.une.edu.au/docview/2002254319?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo

children of the local population will benefit from the integration and inclusion of refugee children. Research shows that exposure to a multicultural society enables children to contain different opinions and challenges leads to improvement of cognitive abilities such as critical thinking and problem solving. Pupils studying in a multicultural environment will effectively learn how to act as grown-ups in a diverse society. According to researchers, it is a highly desired skill, appreciated by many employers. According to research, 96% of employers state that it is highly important for employees to feel comfortable working with colleagues, clients and customers from diverse backgrounds.¹⁷

Various models for integration and inclusion of immigrant children around the world share several key principles. Research has found that integration must happen at a young age.¹⁸ Early integration increases the probability of the integrated and included children to become contributing, employed adults and decreases the probability of dangerous behavior and a life of crime.¹⁹ Integration is more than arranging for the integrated children to be driven to the integrated institutions: for integration to be successful, the education teams must be committed to the cause and to be properly supported and informed. Research shows that the key to successful integration and inclusion is training educational teams. Inadequate training for inclusive education methodologies for refugee children served as an obstacle on their way to integration²⁰. The educational teams - headteachers, teachers, teachers' aids and paramedical teams - must be acquainted with the refugee children's culture and language and allow it to play a part in the integration process²¹. The process must be gradual and carefully implemented.²²

In light of all the above, the education system must act towards integration and inclusion of children of asylum seekers in the educational institutions attended by their Israeli peers. The segregation still practiced by a number of local authorities is not only illegal,

¹⁷ How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students, [Wells, Amy Stuart](#); [Fox, Lauren](#); [Cordova-Cobo, Diana](#). *The Education Digest*; Ann Arbor [Vol. 82, Iss. 1](#), (Sep 2016): 17-24
<https://drive.google.com>

¹⁸ See Patricia Kuhl's research concerning toddlers obtaining a second language
https://www.ted.com/talks/patricia_kuhl_the_linguistic_genius_of_babies
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErPPXfsY6a8>

As well as the research [Integration of refugee children and their families in the Swedish preschool \(1-5\): strategies, objectives and standards](#) <https://drive.google.com>

¹⁹ See long term research performed in the United States, that followed children from families with limited to no means who participated in a public, funded intervention program. The research aimed to see whether the financial investment in young children turned out to be worthwhile in the long run, and the unambiguous conclusion was that it indeed did. The children grew up to be employed adults who paid taxes and were not involved in criminal activity, making the investment in their development "profitable" as this lowered the cost of their care in which the justice and punishment systems (imprisonment) were not involved at any point.
Reynolds AJ, Temple JA, White BAB, Ou S-R, Robertson DL. Age 26 cost-benefit analysis of the Child-Parent Center Early Education Program. *Child Dev.* 2011; 82: 379-404.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>

²⁰ Interventions Supporting the Social Integration of Refugee Children and Youth in School Communities: A Review of the Literature
Andrew D. Reynolds Rachel Bacon
<https://drive.google.com/file>

²¹ Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272-1311. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383>

²² See Weksler, footnote 5

but also damaging as it perpetuates the severe developmental delays experienced by the children. Integration must be initiated according to the following principles:

Gradual integration; In a number of cities in Israel, children of asylum seekers attend separate schools. This segregation is an act of illegal discrimination and it must end. The children must be fully integrated into educational institutions attended by their Israeli peers. For the process of integration to be successful, it is important to begin integration as early as 1st-2nd grade. **Preschools can become places of integration if this does not require for the children to commute to distant preschools, and as long as the burden of preschool integration is left to be carried solely by disadvantaged communities in the neighborhoods where the majority of asylum seekers reside (such as South Tel Aviv);**

Integration of 5-7 asylum seeking pupils in each class;

Additional teachers or teachers' aids in integrated class;²³

Professional training and guidance for teachers: familiarizing the educational teams with the communities of asylum seekers in Israel, pedagogical, methodological and didactic tools for narrowing down the gaps, particularly language gaps, pedagogy of children at risk, and more;

Recruitment of language mediators to assist educational teams connect with parents²⁴;

Initiation of activities in the community to increase parental involvement.

B. State educational institutions - preschools and elementary schools

The 2019 report states that children of asylum seekers usually begin their journey through the education system at the age of 3-4. Many children arrive at the municipal preschools suffering from developmental gaps equaling two to three years compared with their Israeli peers; the preschools' educational teams report that the children suffer from language difficulties as well as behavioral and emotional issues. The teams lack the training and resources (including, crucially, language mediation) necessary to act towards narrowing down such gaps. As a result, the children start first grade unprepared on the behavioral-emotional level (emotional regulation, independence, team work abilities, conversation skills, etc.), as well as on the pedagogical level (recognition of letters, numbers, etc). Children of asylum seekers "drag" the gaps along into their remaining school years. Eventually such gaps become permanent.

²³ For example, see the model suggested by Weksler: "A preschool or elementary school about to integrate asylum seeking children will receive three main resources, in addition to existing standard hours. This is based on The Ministry of Education's principles regarding absorption and special care integration. These mechanisms will allow the addition of standard hours to integrate additional teachers, teachers' aids or pedagogy students who will accompany the lessons, especially the ones in which reading and writing is the heart of the lesson. After school hours, the school or preschool will receive another resource - from the local authority or The Ministry of Education - to operate an after-school facility that will focus on narrowing existing gaps. These facilities will be operated according to existing agreements between The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Finance. In this manner, the additional lessons will be taught by the teachers of the school even if the facility will be operated by volunteers. The facility will not exceed 2 standard hours of taught lessons." Footnote 5.

²⁴ See footnote 5 for Weksler's recommendations on supervision and gradual implementation of the integration program

The difficult situation at the unsupervised nurseries, municipal preschools and elementary schools has far-reaching implications on the children's future. Many children of asylum seekers and teens are children and teens at risk, some of them high risk. Without proper education and social inclusion, dropout rates increase. If this reality does not change and the children receive no support adequate for their pedagogical, developmental and social needs, the grave consequences will be suffered by the refugee communities as well as the absorbing Israeli society.

In the face of the many difficulties, waiting for full integration to take place is not an option. Immediate action must be taken to reinforce the children and the educational teams who work with them. The educational teams must obtain the necessary tools - at least the critical ones in this state of emergency - for them to be able to deal with the many challenges which they are facing. All preschools and elementary schools attended by children of asylum seekers, whether segregated or inclusive, must receive additional support:

Professional training for educational teams, including:

- Getting to know the communities of asylum seekers in Israel, pedagogical, methodological and didactic tools for narrowing down the gaps, particularly language gaps, pedagogy of children at risk, and more;
- Professional accompaniment throughout the school year based on a plan created by the school/preschool principal, including one or more of the following activities: personal counselling, group counselling, study program, observation and feedback, etc.
- Recruitment of language mediators; there is no existing standard for language mediators in the institutions attended by asylum seeking children. Without language mediators the educational teams are not able to exercise full communication with the children's parents, who usually do not speak Hebrew, making involving the parents in their children's education impossible.
- Additional teachers' aids/teachers to reinforce the children's learning of the Hebrew language in the integrating class, especially during the lessons that are centered on reading and writing.

C. Increasing supervision of nurseries for ages 0-3 years.

This document and the recommendations it presents are focused on the actions that the Israeli Ministry of Education and the local authorities must take in order to deal with the severe difficulties faced by children of asylum seekers in the state education system. It is impossible, however, to ignore the first three years in these children's lives, although the Compulsory Education Law does not apply to them. Many children of asylum seekers at the ages of 0-3 years spend their days in unsupervised nurseries known as "babysitters" or "baby warehouses" that are usually operating in unregulated, unsafe, crowded spaces, unsuitable to the needs of babies and infants. The teams at the "babysitters" are not professionals and the children lack the cognitive, lingual, motoric and social stimuli necessary for their development. The

children spend the majority of their day in these daycares, often in bed, with no activities or stimuli. A research report published by Tel Aviv University states that “Many babies (who spend time at the “babysitters”)... demonstrate emotional and developmental delays that lead to irreversible mental, physical and developmental damage.”²⁵

In 2013 the Israeli State Comptroller raised concerns that the babysitters endanger the children who attend them, calling the authorities to act and close the dangerous facilities down²⁶.

In 2015, following several cases of deaths in the “babysitters”, the Israeli government decided to allocate 14 million NIS, transferred to Tel Aviv Municipality over the course of four years, to serve as a budget designated for the foundation of new, supervised child care facilities that will replace the “babysitters”. According to Tel Aviv Municipality, this budget has not been exhausted and only five new facilities opened, catering for 700 infants out of the 2400 living in the city. The majority of the children still attend unsupervised nurseries.

In view of the aforementioned:

The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services must increase supervision of all unsupervised nurseries. It must do everything in its power to act against such establishments that do not meet the laws and regulations, thus endangering the children’s health and development, and even their lives.

Local authorities must publish information concerning the risks such nurseries pose to children’s development and emphasize how important it is for the children to enroll in supervised nurseries.

The government and the local authorities must act to open supervised nurseries for the babies and infants of asylum seekers.

²⁵ Challenges in Education report, footnote 2; also see Patricia Kuhl’s research concerning exposure to language in above age, footnote 18

²⁶ State Comptroller, [Annual Report 63C “The Care for Minors Lacking Civil Status in Israel”](#), (2013) 1871 - 1883

Summary

***“Those were the rules. We had to leave our children
In the arms of strangers. Complete strangers.
They were kept there for half of the day.”***

(Eli Eliyahu, *Those Were The Rules*)

There are children who live among us. Most of them are born and raised here, feeling alienated and estranged from the rest of Israeli society. Their parents, asylum seekers in Israel, are strangers here too. Without any support from the state they struggle to survive financially and to give their children a future, but they are facing enormous hardship. The Israeli education system is the only system in Israel that has opened a door for these children and allowed them in. But this open door must not lead to segregated classrooms, and to discrimination and exclusion. Many educational teams are working night and day to narrow down the gaps between the children of asylum seekers and their Israeli peers, but it will only be made possible by full integration and inclusion of the children in educational institutions attended by their Israeli peers, with proper pedagogical training. It is the only way to narrow down the gaps and shine a light on the future of the children who live among us.

ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel (Reg. NGO) was founded in 2007 out of the pressing need to aid the severe distress of asylum seekers and refugees in Israel. The organization operated in two main courses: it provides psychosocial aid to asylum seekers and acts to promote their rights and status through public and legal activity. Since 2011, the organization, alongside partner organizations, has been acting towards the elimination of segregation in the education of children of asylum seekers, including in Eilat and Petach Tikva.

The Garden Library - A community center for education, culture and art, active in the Tel Aviv Neveh Sha'an neighborhood since 2009. The Garden Library was established upon the belief that culture and education are basic human rights that bridge differences between communities and individuals, and are means to promote lasting social change.

Contact us regarding this document:

Adi Drori-Avraham, Head of Public Advocacy at ASSAF, 050-2717238, adi@assaf.org.il

Dafna Lichtman, CEO of The Garden Library, 054-4287075, dafna.gardenlibrary@gmail.com