

# The Role of the Higher Education System in Promoting Academic Achievements and Engagement in Higher Education of Children and Youth Growing in Out-of-Home Placements

## A Position Paper

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October 2013

Higher education is a central vehicle for social mobility that enhances productive integration into society. It assists individuals in fulfilling their personal potential, promising a better future for them and their children. Children growing up in state care are one of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in society. Some of them come from families that are known to the welfare services, receiving community-based services for children at-risk, or out-of-home services in residential facilities, youth villages, foster families or juvenile correctional facilities. In Israel, about 30,000 children and youth live annually in out-of-home placements. The academic achievements of many of these youths are very low and only a small minority enters higher education as adults.

In this position paper we suggest ways in which the higher education system could promote academic achievements of children in out-of-home placements and support their integration in higher education.

### **Background**

Findings from Israel and other countries point out to the bleak situation of alumni of the child welfare system in multiple life domains. They experience difficulties in finding and maintaining a job, experience financial hardships, suffer from physical and mental health problems, and are involved in non-normative behavior, in much higher rates. The lower academic status of care leavers is receiving a growing attention in recent years. Studies show that educational attainments often have a vital role in determining socio-economic status as adults. For instance, young people holding a Bachelor's degree have a significant financial advantage over others who don't, a gap that grows with age.

Studies in the USA, UK and Australia demonstrate that upon high school graduation, the achievements of youth who have formerly been in care are low and

only a few continue to higher education. An international research team summarizing existing findings on the topic concludes that children in state care are educationally behind their counterparts and that these gaps persist despite considerable time in the care system. Furthermore, it seems that the gaps grow with age (See Hojer et al., 2010, <http://tcr.uioe.ac.uk/yippee/>).

A recent study in Israel (Benbenishty & Shimoni, 2012) portrays a similar picture to that reported in other international studies. Based on analyses of extensive databases in the Central Bureau of Statistics, the study shows that the educational achievement gap between children in care and their cohort's peers is already evident in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade nationally standardized achievement scores, and is especially pronounced in achievements on the matriculation exams by the end of high school. When compared to the rest of the cohort, a smaller proportion of children in care participate in the matriculation exams, a yet smaller proportion is eligible for a full matriculation certificate (a prerequisite for higher education), and a very small proportion is eligible for a matriculation certificate meeting the threshold criteria of high education admission.

Another study among educational residential facilities' alumni (Zeira, Arzev, Benbenishty & Portnoy, 2013) shows that within a cohort of young adults aged 27, the proportion of alumni taking the psychometric exam (a second prerequisite for higher education in Israel) was about half of their cohort peers, and of those taking the exam a much smaller proportion continued to higher education. When comparing cultural groups, the proportion of those continuing to higher education among alumni of care that they, or their parents, were born in Ethiopia was especially low.

A series of studies suggest that youth in residential facilities have many unmet educational needs. For example, they report needs in: counseling and guidance in choosing the appropriate academic institutions, preparing for the psychometric exams, and financial assistance for tuition and living costs while studying (Benbenishty, Zeira, Melkman, & Refaeli, 2013).

In light of the consistent findings regarding the low educational achievements of care leavers, measures are being taken in many places around the world in order to promote their education while in care, and their consequent integration into higher education. In a few a places (e.g., UK, USA) legislation and matching interventions have been developed in recent years in order to create new opportunities for care leavers to return to school and support the integration in education of these excluded

groups. In Israel, this issue has not yet been addressed thoroughly and currently there is no legislation or policy focusing on integration of youth formerly placed in care. Notwithstanding, this challenge is receiving growing recognition by Israeli welfare officials (Sharvit & Vagshal, 2008).

### **Recommendation for Action**

We recommend that higher education institutes take part in the promotion of the academic achievements of children and youth while in care and assist their integration in higher education following their transition out of care. We first wish to emphasize that such measures should be done in full cooperation amongst all parties involved: government offices (welfare, education, defense, industry commerce and employment), the national council for higher education and the higher education institutes, and relevant NGOs.

The contribution of the higher education institutions can take place along a few critical points in time:

1. While in care- Higher education institutions will operate to enhance academic achievements and motivation to engage in higher education of youth in care through such measures as:
  - Placing students as mentors and role models for children and adolescents in out-of-home facilities
  - Increasing children and adolescents' exposure to higher education through visits to higher education campuses, students and faculty visits to the facilities, etc.
2. Following leaving care- Youth enlisted in the army or the national service numerous challenges and many not consider further education nor are they aware of their special rights and opportunities regarding higher education. We therefore recommend the cooperation of higher education institutions, the national service, the Israeli Defense Force and the Ministry of Security for the purpose of:
  - Making information regarding higher education rights and opportunities accessible, encouraging and supporting involvement in education prior to service completion.
  - Supplementing academic deficits while still in service

3. Prior to enrolment in higher education and during studies - Higher education institutions could contribute to the integration of care alumni by supporting the procedures leading to admission to higher education:

- Making higher education counseling and guidance accessible (at a minimal cost)
- Assistance in matriculation completion and preparation for the psychometric exam
- Setting special admission criteria for this group
- Providing tuition and living scholarships
- Providing educational support and assistance
- Providing emotional support when needed

In recent years our team has been engaged in studying multiple issues relevant to the education of children and adolescents in care. This work suggests that this group is characterized by numerous needs that currently are left unmet. However, we found that the matter is receiving a growing recognition and that various organizations are in the process of developing interventions and collaborations that may contribute to progress in this area. We believe that the time is right for a wide spread pooling of resources and for the development of policy and a general intervention program catering for the needs of this excluded population.