

Children of asylum seekers in Israel: mapping of key educational issues and needs

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I. Introduction

This report focuses on children from the asylum seeking community in Israel, aiming to examine the needs and challenges of this population in Israel’s state-run education system, i.e., municipal-run kindergartens and elementary schools. The information, data, and conclusions presented in this report are based on a series of interviews with teachers and with welfare and health officials, as well as with professional staff working with children of asylum seekers, particularly in Tel Aviv. The report is also based on the years of experience of ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, and the Garden Library organization, in working with the asylum seeking community in Israel. The purpose of this document is to present the current state of affairs and to offer recommendations to improve the wellbeing of asylum seeking children attending schools in Israel’s education system, while calling upon the relevant authorities to address the multiple challenges that they face.

II. Background: asylum seekers in Israel

According to data of the Population, Immigration and Borders Authority, Israel is home to approximately 30,000 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan.¹ Israel maintains a policy of non-removal with regards to them, granting them “temporary group protection.” Although asylum seekers reside in Israel legally, they are denied many basic rights. The National Health Law and National Insurance Law do not apply to them, and therefore, their access to health and social services, including welfare, is significantly constrained. The consequences of neglecting these asylum seekers are evident first and foremost among the most vulnerable groups, namely children and youths, women, survivors of the Sinai torture camps, people with health conditions and/or with disabilities, and many others.

The State of Israel does not grant asylum seekers official work permits, practically adopting a policy of ambiguity regarding their employment, which results in their exploitation and severely limits their employment opportunities. In addition, the Deposit Law, which came into effect in May 2017 obligated employers to deduct 20 percent of the salaries of asylum seekers and place them in a deposit fund that the employees can only redeem upon leaving Israel; for populations defined as particularly vulnerable, the deposit amounted to six percent of their monthly income. The impact of the Deposit Law has been socially and economically devastating, and is particularly felt on women, children and people with disabilities.²

As of 2018, about 14,000 asylum seekers reside in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, the overwhelming majority of whom live in three neighborhoods in South Tel Aviv: Neve Sha’anana, Hatikva, and Shapira. Following Tel Aviv, Petah Tikva is the city with the largest concentration of asylum seekers (2,500), and then are the cities of Netanya, Arad, Eilat, Bnei Brak, and Jerusalem, each with a community of 1,300 asylum seekers on average. In other cities, the number of asylum seeker residents varies from a few dozen to several hundred.³

¹ Data on Foreigners in Israel, Population, Borders and Immigration Authority, January 2019, p. 5, including footnotes. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreigners_summary_2018.pdf (Hebrew)

² “‘They Make Me Go Hungry so I Would Leave Israel’ - Ramifications of the Deposit Law on asylum seekers at ASSAF”, July 2018. http://assaf.org.il/en/sites/default/files/ramifications_paper_EN.pdf

³ The Economic Plan for the Matter of Refugees, a Social-Economic Plan Concerning the Matter of Refugees and Rehabilitation of Southern Tel Aviv, 2018, authored by senior directors in the private sector, p. 11-14. <http://drom-tlv-plan.mdigital.co.il/> (Hebrew)

For over a decade, Eritrean, Sudanese, and other asylum seekers live in Israel without regular status, without rights and with little certainty regarding their future. Although they reside in Israel legally, the government sees them as “infiltrators”; it avoids setting a clear policy regarding their status and denies them their rights.

III. Children of asylum seekers in Israel

The population of children of asylum seekers in Israel is particularly vulnerable. The memory of escaping their countries of origin and the difficult and traumatic journey to Israel left a mark on those who arrived in the country at a young age.

“There are many cases of children growing up in Israel and experiencing secondary trauma from their parents who have undergone difficult experiences on the way to Israel and that affect their ability to function... The children were exposed to terrible horrors at a young age, memories of which accompany them in their daily lives.”⁴

Like their parents, these children lack permanent legal status in Israel and many of their rights are violated daily. Their families face multiple, post-immigration challenges⁵ and policies that marginalize them socially and economically. The denial of health and social services from most parents of refugee children, along with Deposit Law sanctions, pushed many families to extreme poverty and distress, and placed their children at risk. As the report ‘This is No Place for Children’ describes, it is apparent that “feelings of confusion, detachment, and uncertainty resulting from their lack of status hinder children’s proper development, especially regarding the formation of their identity. The children live in risk of deportation in an unfamiliar country, causing a sense of existential anxiety that becomes an essential part of their existence.”⁶

Health – refugee children are entitled to healthcare subsidized by the Ministry of Health. However, due to the abject poverty of many families, some parents cannot even afford subsidized insurance; therefore, the children remain without health coverage.

⁴ “‘This is Not a Place for Children:’ The Lives of Children of Asylum Seekers in South Tel-Aviv”, The Garden Library, November 2017, p. 6. <https://bit.ly/2YmjOlh>

⁵ Post-immigration challenges are those facing immigrants and asylum seekers in the host country. These challenges include dealing with the local immigration policy, challenges in employment, loneliness, lack of resources, discrimination and racism. For more, see Schick M, Morina N, Mistridis P, Schnyder U, Bryant RA, Nickerson A. Changes in Post-migration Living Difficulties Predict Treatment Outcome in Traumatized Refugees. *Front Psychiatry*. 2018; 9: 476. Published Oct 9, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6189477/>

⁶ This is not a place for children, p. 20. <https://bit.ly/2YmjOlh>

Social services – According to a 2016 memorandum of the director general of the Ministry Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services, “Regulation on Providing Social Services to Minors Lacking Legal Status,”⁷ every at-risk child, regardless of their status, should be provided services by municipal or local council social service departments in which their family lives. However, in practice, not every refugee child receives the psycho-social services that they need. Moreover, because the National Insurance Law does not apply to asylum seekers, refugee children are not entitled to national insurance stipends. This is particularly challenging for families with children with special needs.

Education – According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Israel is obligated to provide basic rights to minors residing within its jurisdiction, including the right to education, regardless of their legal status. Indeed, refugee children are entitled to be fully integrated into Israel’s education system. However, even though most children are integrated into the system in accordance with the Israeli law, it is apparent that the children, their parents and the educational staff face many challenges within it.

Data on refugee children – as of today, there is no official single body in Israel that provides summary statistics on refugee children.⁸ While a variety of ministries maintain databases, including the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Services, and the Ministry of Health, this data is not combined into one orderly dataset. Therefore, this report will be based on the assessment of various official bodies. According to these estimates, as of the end of 2018, Israel is home to approximately 10,000 minors who are children of asylum seekers and migrants, most of whom were born in Israel, and are below the age of 10. Approximately 7,000 of these minors live in South Tel Aviv.⁹ When children of asylum seekers register for kindergarten and school, the Ministry of Education registers them with an

⁷ Special memorandum of the director general, Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services, 2006, “Regulation on Handling Social Services to Minors Lacking Legal Status.” <https://bit.ly/2GbPUlg> (in Hebrew)

⁸ Research report: Mapping out developmental conditions in the ‘child warehouses’ the unsanctioned kindergartens of children of migrant workers and asylum seekers in Israel, Tel Aviv University, 2016, p. 5. <https://law.acri.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/babysitters-report0116.pdf> (in Hebrew)

⁹ The information is based on the data held by the following authorities:

- Estimates of the health directorate presented at a conference of the Association for Public Health Workers of the Ministry of Health, January 2018, indicate that about 10,000 minors lacking legal status reside in Israel.
- According to estimates of the Ministry of Interior, as of the end of 2018, about 6,000 children were born to asylum seekers in Israel. “Data on Foreigners in Israel,” the Population, Borders and Immigration Authority, p. 5 in the footnote. <https://bit.ly/2WkSOLx> (Hebrew)
- According to the assessment of Mesila, Aid and Information Center for Migrant Workers and Refugees Tel Aviv Municipality, Tel Aviv is home to approximately 7,000 minors who lack legal status. Mesila data, summary of 2018. <https://www.mesila.co.il/2018> (Hebrew)
- The economic plan for the matter of refugees, a social-economic plan concerning the matter of refugees and rehabilitation of southern Tel Aviv, 2018, authored by senior directors in the private sector, p. 11-14. <http://drom-tlv-plan.mdigital.co.il/> (in Hebrew)

internal serial number, which is catalogued as a passport number, and therefore, there is no administrative differentiation between children of asylum seekers, children of migrant workers, and children of foreign diplomats stationed in Israel. This makes it challenging to gather accurate data on the number of children of asylum seekers who attend schools in Israel's education system. The following data is based on mapping and analyzing statistics provided by different bodies and organizations, and includes both children of asylum seekers and other migrants. It should be stressed that these **are mere assessments**:

- **Infants (ages 0 to 3) in Tel Aviv:** According to an assessment by Mesila, a municipality-run social service agency for the foreign community living in Tel Aviv, and according to the Family Health Centers run by the Ministry of Health ("Tipat Halav"), there are approximately 2,400 children in this age range.¹⁰
- **Kindergarten-age children (ages 3 to 6) in Tel Aviv:** According to data provided by Mesila, Tel Aviv is home to 2,380 children who are registered in municipality-run kindergartens.¹¹
- **Children in primary school (ages 6 to 13) in Tel Aviv:** According to data provided by Mesila, 1,694 migrant and refugee children are registered in Tel Aviv municipal schools.¹²
- **Teenagers (ages 13 to 18) in Tel Aviv:** According to data provided by Mesila, 612 students are registered in secondary educational institutions in Tel Aviv.¹³

These numbers amount to a total of about 7,000 underage migrants and asylum seekers residing in Tel Aviv, of whom about 6,000 were born in Israel.¹⁴

As stated, this report focuses on Tel Aviv, in which the majority of asylum seekers' children lives, and examines the conditions in municipal kindergartens and schools there. Pertaining to their integration in the education system, most of the children of asylum seekers in Tel Aviv attend schools and kindergartens designated for children of foreigners. In the 2018-2019 academic year, the overwhelming majority of children of asylum seekers attended schools and kindergartens assigned to this community, in 66 kindergarten classes and in three elementary schools.

¹⁰ According to the number of patients in the childhood healthcare centers among asylum seekers and migrant workers in Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Data provided in January 2019 by the Public Health Sector Directorate, according to Mesila. <https://www.mesila.co.il/2018> (Hebrew)

¹¹ According to data provided by Mesila on July 14, 2019.

¹² See fn. 11.

¹³ See fn. 9.

¹⁴ See fn. 9.

IV. Unregulated kindergartens for infants (ages 0 to 3) known as “child warehouses”

Before examining the state of kindergartens and elementary schools, it is worth spotlighting the care provided to children of asylum seekers until the age of 3. The Law of Compulsory Education in Israel only applies to children over that age, and therefore, due to the lack of nurseries that can provide affordable care for babies and infants under the age of three, the migrant and refugee communities have created their own unregulated “nurseries” for babies and infants. These unlicensed facilities, also known by the authorities and concerned professionals as “babysitters” or “child warehouses,” are run by women from the migrant community who lack all training or certification to care for children or to run educational facilities. Due to their unofficial nature and often problematic locations, these “warehouses” are characterized by harsh physical conditions that place thousands of babies and infants in danger.

The financial hardship of asylum seekers with children, who reside in Israel without their extended families and with limited communal support, forces parents to find low-cost facilities where their infants can stay from the early morning until the evening, due to the parents’ long working hours.

According to Mesila, “most of these facilities are characterized by low standards, lack of communication with the children, total absence of stimulation, inadequate nutrition, numerous safety hazards, [and] uncertified staff.” Mesila further states that the children staying at these facilities for many hours per day suffer from “significant developmental, emotional, and educational deprivations and gaps.”¹⁵ The 2013 State Comptroller report also stated that “children suffer ongoing neglect in the babysitter [facilities].... The children remain in their cribs most hours of the day, without stimulation and enrichment; the physical conditions are harsh – of poverty, overcrowding, and neglect; the care for the children, their supervision, and the provisions for their developmental needs, are lacking, delaying their cognitive and motoric development.”¹⁶ In many of the institutions, caregivers do not speak the same language of the children and therefore they communicate in English, although it is neither the staff’s or children’s mother tongue. The children spend only a few hours per day with their parents, and therefore their mother tongues do not become ingrained. They hear broken English from their caregivers and in fact do not acquire any language properly. This situation harms their linguistic development.

The children stay at the daycare center from early in the morning until late in the evening, in most cases under the supervision of a single staff member, in crowded conditions without leaving the physical

¹⁵ Mesila data, summary for 2018. <https://www.mesila.co.il/2018> (Hebrew)

¹⁶ State Comptroller report 63C for 2013, “The Treatment of Minors Lacking Civil Status in Israel,” p. 1872, 1875.

premises, and sometimes without even leaving the bed that they lie in. In the afternoons, they are joined by children from municipal kindergartens who cannot register for the afternoon programs there, due to financial difficulties, or because there is no such option. This increases the crowding and makes the conditions even more difficult.¹⁷

According to a research report published by the School of Psychological Sciences at Tel Aviv University on the conditions of these so-called "children warehouses," it is evident that "many babies[...] show developmental and emotional delays that can amount to irreversible mental, physical and developmental damage. The outcome of extended stay at facilities in which the deficiencies are so severe, causes serious and prolonged developmental harm in a large proportion of infants." Along with the prospect of severe developmental damage, the stay in the makeshift facilities endangers the children's lives. The State Comptroller's report on the issue states that "the consequences of staying in these daycares, in their conditions, indicate a high chance of real damage to the proper development of the toddlers and children, and sometimes pose a real danger to their lives."

Indeed, in recent years there have been several deaths of infants due to neglect and harsh conditions in these makeshift facilities. Due to this serious situation, in 2015 the government decided to allot a four-year budget totaling 14,000,000 NIS to establish supervised facilities as an alternative to these unofficial ones. As of June 2019, four such facilities have been established in Tel Aviv, but for only about 600 children. Thus, most children are still in the unofficial kindergartens. To our knowledge, the budget has not been utilized in full.

V. Municipal kindergartens

As previously mentioned, under the Compulsory Education Law from three years old children of asylum seekers are eligible to attend municipal kindergartens. In the 2019-2020 school year, there are approximately 66 kindergartens in Tel Aviv for asylum seekers and migrant workers, with about 2,380 children who are registered between the ages of three to six. Most of the kindergartens are in the clusters of "Pestalozzi", "Leshinsky" and "Moshi'ah" in the Yaffo borough, and in Neve Sha'anani and Hatikva neighborhoods in South Tel Aviv. Many of the children attending these kindergartens suffer from developmental lags, language difficulties, and behavioral and emotional issues. These difficulties and delays are in part a result of the years spent in makeshift institutions during their early childhood.

¹⁷ Research report: Mapping out developmental conditions in the 'child warehouses', p. 13-15.
<https://law.acri.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/babysitters-report0116.pdf> (in Hebrew)

Kindergarten teachers, principals and the other educational staff face many challenges on a daily basis due to the children's situation, without suitable training or additional resources.

At-risk children - According to Tel Aviv municipal social services officials, most of the children of asylum seekers meet the criteria for at-risk children. The lack of official status, financial difficulties, the trauma of the journey, and a life in survival mode, affect the mental state of these children and their families. Parents find it difficult to set aside time to emotionally care for their children, therefore increasing the children's distress and neglect. As stated in "Guidelines for staff working in kindergartens attended by children of migrants and asylum seekers," published by the Ministry of Education: "The immigration experience disrupts the family unit, creates a reversal in the functions of parents and their children, and as a result, children of asylum seekers and migrant workers carry a significant emotional burden. It is common for kindergarten children to suffer from a shortage of essential supplies and may suffer from malnutrition. This is sometimes reflected in the fact that some arrive to school hungry, inappropriately dressed for the weather, in clothing that is either too big or too small, and so on.

The environment that the children live is another risk factor. Many asylum seekers live in South Tel Aviv, an area that has suffered years of neglect by the authorities. The young children living in these neighborhoods are exposed to crime, violence, drugs, and prostitution on a daily basis. This reality threatens their sense of security and results in public spaces becoming areas of sexual abuse, harassment, and other dangerous situations. With the streets of Neve Sha'anun being a playground for so many of the children, it is not unusual for example, for a child to play with used syringes.

Health - Children oftentimes come to the kindergarten when they are not entirely healthy, suffering, among other issues, from skin diseases such as ringworm or viral warts. Some do not have health insurance, and when they are sick, their parents are forced to send them to kindergarten anyway, or alternatively to the makeshift institutions, for fear of losing their jobs.

Developmental delays - Many children begin kindergarten lagging, on average, two or even three years behind Israeli children of the same age. This results in severe difficulties in many areas, such as motor skills, game ability, and others (for example, many of them will find it difficult at a three or four to hold a pen or play simple games).

Language Difficulties - Most children have issues related to language difficulties. They start pre-preschool with deficient language skills and with almost no expertise in any language. As such, it is only at the age of three that they begin to acquire language skills. Therefore, as children with significantly

impeded language development, they have difficulties in self-expression and in communicating with each other, with the kindergarten staff, and even with their parents.

Emotional and Behavioral Problems - The years that they attended unofficial kindergartens, the life with intergenerational trauma, and the difficulties to adapt to life in Israel deeply affect the family unit as a whole, and indeed affect the emotional state of the children. A lack of emotional development, frustration, difficulties in self-expression, poor socialization skills, and extreme attachment to adults are just some of the ramifications. The plight of the children and the difficulties they face result in a lack of boundaries, in failure to accept authority, and in discipline problems, among other issues.

Diagnoses and special needs – The large number of children with emotional and communication problems, developmental delays, or behavior issues, requires a large number of professional diagnoses. Children are eligible for psychological and developmental diagnoses through the Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) and through the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) in the local authorities. Only children insured through HMOs are eligible for diagnoses by the Child Development Institutes of the health organizations, while the EPS is only qualified to diagnose children over the age of five. The outcome is that uninsured children under the age of five are not diagnosed; they do not receive appropriate treatment in accordance with their needs, and are not integrated into preschools that are suitable to attend to their needs. Children with developmental delays, emotional and behavioral problems, or children on the autistic spectrum, are enrolled in regular kindergartens. This makes it difficult for the child, who does not receive the care that he or she deserves, the educational staff who lacks the training to work with children with special needs, and for the other children in the class.

Even when a child is diagnosed, staff members are engaged in extra work vis-à-vis the parents: they have to explain the situation to the parents, translate forms for them, schedule appointments, and facilitate access to information, most of which is in Hebrew. In addition, in cases in which diagnosed pupils receive a "combined treatment package," including paramedical care at various centers around the city, parents will find it difficult to take their children there, due to their financial circumstances, and therefore the children do not receive the treatment they are entitled to.

Language barriers and cultural mediation - Despite the number of children of asylum seekers in municipal kindergartens, and the number of educational institutions designated to this population, no cultural mediation and translation services are provided, and no positions have been allocated for this purpose. Kindergarten staff are required to work without language and cultural mediation, resulting in

difficulties communicating with the parents of the children, in updating them on their children's situation, getting them to sign forms, and working with them in partnership to provide the children with the best possible care. With no other alternative, the teachers are helped by other parents who speak basic Hebrew or English. This is a necessary but problematic solution, since the mediators are not professionals, and it is also not ethical in terms of maintaining confidentiality and regulatory conduct. This is most noticeable in the special education sector, in which parental involvement with the paramedical staff, therapists, and the pedagogical staff is crucial.

Preparation for first grade – following the above, it goes without saying that despite the efforts of devoted teachers, children complete preschool without being prepared for first grade. Kindergarten teachers spend most of their time on development skills that other children would have normally gained throughout infancy and in early childhood. These children are not prepared on an emotional-behavioral level (emotional regulation, independence, ability to work in groups, conversational skills, etc.) and an pedagogical level (letter recognition, number identification, etc.). More on this subject can be found in the section "Elementary Schools".

Guidance and Training - The teaching staffs face a new reality in those kindergartens that are attended by children of asylum seekers. Teachers have not received formal training to work with a foreign population, and for most of them this is the first time that they have worked with asylum seekers. They are exposed to new cultures and languages, issues of identity and the children's official status in the country, and the unique characteristics and needs of these children. In recent years, teachers have been offered training for teaching in a multicultural environment, but this does not provide a full and required response. In light of the many difficulties described in this mapping, teachers report emotional overload, frustration, distress, and an acute feelings of helplessness that require ongoing professional guidance, in addition to training sessions that preschool teachers and assistants receive at kindergartens for Israeli children.

Lack of Uniformity in ID numbers - As described above, in the absence of proper registration system of the children of asylum seekers, various government ministries such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Services, use different identification and registration numbers. The lack of a single unique identification number makes coordinating between the various ministries difficult and results in incorrect records; it burdens the system requiring hours of work to locate children and affects the care that they receive.

In conclusion: The situation in the kindergartens that cater for the immigrant population requires immediate attention and improvement. The Ministry of Education is aware of the challenges facing Israeli kindergarten teachers who work with asylum seekers, and recognizes the harsh realities of the children studying in kindergartens, acknowledging that their development is at risk. This is evidenced in the document "Guidelines for staff working in kindergartens with children of immigrants and asylum seekers" referenced earlier in this report. It is a comprehensive professional document written with the purpose of helping teachers in kindergartens. It states at its outset: "What characterizes these children is a situation that puts their development at risk: life in a foreign country; legal status that makes their lives be influenced by uncertainty, which affects their emotional security; living in families suffering from poverty [...]. These difficult living conditions lower the children's performance potential and result in many behavioral and social issues."

Despite the importance of training for teaching in multicultural environments provided to kindergarten teams, and the importance of the guideline document referenced here, they are insufficient to manage the current situation. The guidelines do not offer a response regarding the organizational changes that are required to address the many problems described in the document, and they place most of the responsibility in dealing with the issues on the educational teams. For example, throughout the document, and especially in the "Application" section, teachers are expected to acquire knowledge of the preschool children and their characteristics, to integrate books written in the children's languages into the school library and recruit interpreters to communicate with parents. It also recommends that teachers "learn who can assist; find volunteers to help at the beginning... and have knowledge about aid organizations that can help them."

The teachers are expected to manage the present situation and find solutions all on their own. The dedicated managers and teams of the kindergartens are doing everything they can to assist the children and reduce the gaps between them and their Israeli peers. For example, in some of the schools, they have recruited occupational therapy students to help the kindergarten staff, to adapt and design appropriate training for them, and even to plan and lead parent training sessions and support groups. Despite the fact that dedicated educational teams do as much as possible to cope with the difficult circumstances, the large number of preschool children, their unique situation, developmental gaps that they suffer from, language problems, lack of appropriate training, and lack of a budget, do not allow for an effective solution to the needs of asylum-seeking children and prevent beneficial educational work.

VI. Elementary schools

As children of asylum seekers reach the end of their kindergarten years, they are enrolled in one of the four schools in South Tel Aviv designated for the community of asylum seekers and migrants (“Hayarden” in Hatikva neighborhood, “Bialik Rogozin” in Neve Sha’anana and “Keshet” and “Gvanim” on Hamasger Street). In 2018-2019, 1,700 pupils attended the above schools.^[1] The great efforts made by the educational teams in kindergartens are unable to change the difficult conditions of many of the children, and the children find themselves completely unprepared for first grade. Their difficulties continue in school and leave them far behind their Israeli peers. In more severe cases, children find themselves in school after transitioning directly from unofficial, makeshift facilities, instead of first spending time in municipal preschool.

Academic level and preparation for 1st grade - The educational teams in municipal kindergartens, as well as in schools, testify that the children are not ready, on an emotional-behavioral and pedagogical level. On the emotional-behavioral scale, the children are for example very much behind on social skills and find it difficult to be part of a group. This is manifested in many of them experiencing difficulty in sitting in a classroom or working in a team, both which are very frustrating for the child. On the pedagogical level, many of the pupils show no phonological awareness - they are unable to recognize any letter, count to ten, hold a pencil, etc. As a result, most of the teachers’ time is invested in teaching basic skills that are normally taught in kindergarten.

Health - Just like in the kindergartens, many of the children arriving at the schools are not well. Their families experience grave financial difficulties and as a result, some of the children suffer from malnutrition. Not every school can correct this wrong, since not all schools have a breakfast and/or lunch program.

Delayed development - Delays and gaps experienced by the children are making their life as students very difficult. Many children are not able to thread beads, paint, hold a pencil or use scissors. This narrows down teaching methods and harms the academic level of the school.

Linguistic difficulties - The children have a very limited vocabulary. Their phonological awareness and level of literacy are much lower than those of their Israeli peers. These linguistic difficulties are not specific to Hebrew, as the children have no strong grasp of any language at all.

The major disabilities in linguistic development suffered by most children lead to grave frustration as the children find themselves unable to perform any of the tasks they are expected to perform in class. This frustration, combined with a sense of incompetence, can, at best, cause a pupil to give up on the learning process or even lead to manifestations of anger and violence that have an impact on other students and on the atmosphere in the classroom.

Emotional and behavioral issues - The fact that many of the students are dealing with emotional and behavioral issues creates a harsh, violent atmosphere in the classroom. Their lack of emotional regulation causes disciplinary issues manifesting in rage, doors being slammed, and pupils storming out of the classroom. This harms the learning environment immensely, making it very hard on teachers to do their work. It is important to note that violence has been a part of these children's lives for a long time, as the majority of the children live in South Tel Aviv and are exposed to violence in their neighborhoods. Thus, at school violence is prohibited, but thrives everywhere else around them. This message confuses the children and makes it even more difficult to treat this phenomenon in an educational manner.

Diagnoses and special needs - Many elementary school pupils face attention deficit disorders, learning disabilities, and emotional-behavioral issues. Pupils are entitled to a diagnosis by HMOs or municipal EPS. Many asylum seeking children do not have health insurance; therefore the teaching staff turns to the EPS to request a diagnosis. The EPS is struggling to deal with the flow of incoming requests for diagnoses; hence, only a small number of children is actually diagnosed. Due to a deficiency in human resources, even those diagnosed do not receive the variety of services to which they are entitled, such as a personal aide, tutoring, psychotherapy, or corrective teaching. Also, professionals testify that not only does this population need diagnoses that it does not receive, but the diagnoses that are made are not always accurate. This is due to the lack of their compatibility with the specifics of the population of asylum seekers. Israeli children are usually diagnosed with delays or organic disorders that are neurological or congenital. When it comes to children of asylum seekers, the disorders and disabilities are also a result of living under acute and dire psychosocial conditions of how they have been brought up and the facilities in which they spent their formative years. Thus, it is very hard to diagnose those children living in Israel with no status or language, using tools identical to those used to diagnose Israeli children.

Regular attendance - Regular attendance is a central issue that educational teams must face. Many pupils do not regularly attend school, missing many school days. Truant officers do not present a sufficient solution to this problem.

Linguistic mediation - Linguistic mediation is no more available at elementary schools than it is at municipal kindergartens, and this makes communication between the staff and the parents very difficult. The pupils' parents seldom understand what is expected of them and of their children; they remain unaware of their child's academic status, their strengths, and weaknesses. This manifests in everyday routines but also on the deeper levels of the students' needs. The parents do not know if their child is leaving school for an outdoor activity; It is difficult for them to understand the educational teams when contacted regarding their children's behavioral issues, diagnoses, committees, or any other matter arising at annual parents' meetings.

Training and guidance - As is the case of the kindergartens, the educational teams in the elementary schools do not receive proper training and guidance that enable them to work with the population of children of asylum seekers. Many teachers are unfamiliar with the children's background or with the characteristics of their community. This leads to feelings of frustration and exhaustion, and the turnover rate is relatively high, since teachers do not experience any notion of success. Although school principals promote relevant training for their teams, they are insufficient, and there is a need for a wider systematic plan.

In conclusion: The situation in the elementary schools is indeed a difficult one. Principals and educational teams are doing everything in their power to make up for the gaps and deficiencies, to manage behavioral issues and to make the study plan compatible with children of asylum seekers. Some schools raise funds from private donors to pay for linguistic mediation and diagnoses for children who are in desperate need of them. It seems that some attempts have been made in recent years to bring this issue before the Ministry of Education, but they have failed.

Despite the high devotion of the educational teams, without strategic planning and funds allocated to cater to the specific needs of the children of asylum seekers on both state and municipal levels - the harsh reality at schools will deteriorate further, tumbling down toward a point of no return.

VII. Conclusion: specific needs require specific measures

Following all of the above, an orderly plan that is suitable to the specific needs of children of asylum seekers in the education system must be urgently devised, because specific needs require specific measures.

Despite the complex political reality, children of asylum seekers grow up in Israel are a part of the Israeli education system, and a part of the society. The difficult situation in the unofficial facilities for infants (ages 0-3), as well as in the municipal kindergartens and elementary schools, results in serious implications. Children and youths from the community of asylum seekers are therefore considered to be at risk, sometimes even high risk. To prevent their condition from deteriorating, resources must be allocated to the education of this population - the sooner, the better. Since many of the children suffer from developmental delays, we can expect a rise in the percentage of children who are admitted to special needs educational institutions -- which are far more expensive than non-special needs schools.

Alongside the financial implications, this situation also has many grave social consequences. Education is the basis of socialization. Deficiencies in education and social integration will cause dropping out of school, loitering, and more. If the reality these children live in does not improve, they continue to receive inadequate care, or their academic, developmental and social needs remain unmet, the asylum-seeker community will suffer grave consequences, as will the Israeli society as a whole. The education system must play a key role and lead this necessary change.


While the children of asylum seekers have been integrated into the Israeli education system for over a decade, there is still no correlation between the children's profiles, characteristics and needs, and the existing allocated resources and solutions for problems and difficulties. So far, there is no pedagogical, systematic plan for their integration. Authorities are aware of the growth rate of the population of asylum seekers, and strategies to integrate this population into the education system on both state and municipal levels should have been developed a long time ago.

An orderly plan, which considers many aspects, such as hiring more dedicated staff for the schools working with children of asylum seekers, adding paramedical personnel, reducing the number of children in each group or class, adding an extra caregiver at each municipal kindergarten, creating pedagogical and emotional training courses for the educational teams, allocating jobs for linguistic mediators, allowing access to diagnoses from an early age, and more, is needed to cope with this situation.

The Ministry of Education and the local authorities are not solely responsible for the severe condition of children of asylum seekers in the education system and in Israeli society in general. The children's lack of status, their surroundings, the trauma of migration, and very limited access to social services and health services harm them and affect their development. A systemic response must consider the complexities of factors influencing their lives. It is the wise, or morally, socially, and financially responsible step that must be taken, in favor of the children and the Israeli society as a whole.

VIII. About this document

This document has been compiled by ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, and The Garden Library, with the help of Ms. Michal Shendar. The document is based on a Hebrew report published in December 2019.

We are grateful for the generous support of the Canadian government and the Canadian embassy in Israel, which allowed for the mapping of the services provided to children of asylum seekers in Israel and the challenges to their integration in the education system. 

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ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel was founded in 2007. It provides psychosocial assistance to asylum seekers and acts to promote their rights and status in encounters with the state authorities.

The Garden Library - A community center for education, culture, and art, active in the Neve Sha'anun neighborhood since 2009. The Garden Library was established based upon the belief that culture and education are basic human rights that bridge differences between communities and individuals, and that can affect lasting social change.

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