



THE ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

RESEARCH REPORT

Mapping of Methods to Advance Low-Achieving Students in an Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Network of Schools (Ma'ayan Ha'Hinuch Ha'Torani)

Dalia Ben-Rabi ✦ Ronli Rotem ✦ Viacheslav Konstantinov ✦ Miriam Navot

The study was commissioned by the Division for Non-Official Recognized Education at the Ministry of Education through the Office of the Chief Scientist and funded with its assistance and that of the Harry Weinrebe Fund for the Advancement of Children

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Editor: Anat Berberian

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Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute

Engelberg Center for Children and Youth

P.O.B. 3886

Jerusalem 91037, Israel

Tel: (02) 655-7400

Fax: (02) 561-2391

Website: www.jdc.org.il/brookdale



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Executive Summary

1. Background

The advancement of low-achieving students is one of the most important objectives of the education system in Israel and schools work in a variety of ways to achieve it. The goal of this study was to learn about the methods that elementary schools in the Ma'ayan Ha'Hinuch Ha'Torani (MHT) ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) education network use in order to advance low-achieving students, the challenges the schools face in doing so and their unmet needs. The findings will serve the Ministry of Education, the MHT network, local authorities, schools and nonprofit organizations as a basis for planning policy and suitable intervention strategies to advance low-achieving students. The study was conducted in conjunction with a study mapping activities to advance low-achievers in the State and State-Religious streams in Israel.

MHT is the second largest education network in the ultra-Orthodox sector. It is under the authority of the Division of Non-Official Recognized Education at the Ministry of Education and, in 2011/12, had an enrolment of 33,000 students – approximately 17% of ultra-Orthodox elementary school students (excluding those in special education). According to data from the Ministry of Education and MHT, in 2011/12, the network comprised 167 elementary schools (excluding special education) – 83 boys' schools, 51 girls' schools and 33 mixed schools. While part of the ultra-Orthodox education system, MHT has its own particular characteristics. The schools are spread throughout the country, but many of them are in Israel's periphery or are located in socioeconomically weak neighborhoods.

The mapping presented in this report is not only the first of its kind to be conducted in MHT schools, but is also the first mapping of the ultra-Orthodox educational sector altogether. Although the MHT schools cater to only a particular segment of the larger ultra-Orthodox population in terms of religious inclinations and other characteristics, their willingness to take part in the mapping has enabled us to look into the schools for the first time and gain an in-depth view of the way ultra-Orthodox schools contend with the difficulties of their students and their needs.

The study findings offer a comprehensive picture of: the efforts to advance low-achieving students in these schools; the principals and teachers' assessments of the extent to which the assistance offered to low achievers is sufficient and effective; the difficulties and challenges in implementing the interventions; and of the still-unmet needs. Importantly, however, the findings of the study do not include an in-depth evaluation of the quality of the activities or the success in achieving the goals.

2. Method

The mapping was conducted through a survey of principals of elementary schools (grades 1-8, excluding special education) in the MHT network and a survey of a sample of homeroom teachers. The data were collected through self-report questionnaires for the principals and telephone

interviews with the teachers during the 2011/12 school year. Altogether, 143 principals and 158 homeroom teachers responded (response rate of 86% and 69%, respectively).

The conceptual framework was based on earlier studies conducted in the State and State Religious school system for the first time in 2005/6 and again in 2011/12 (hereafter, the national study). In the preliminary stage of the current study, the national study's system of concepts was revised and adapted for the ultra-Orthodox educational framework. However, most of the topics and questions were identical to those in the national study, allowing for a comparison of the two studies.

The study examined the activity and needs in the school on four levels:

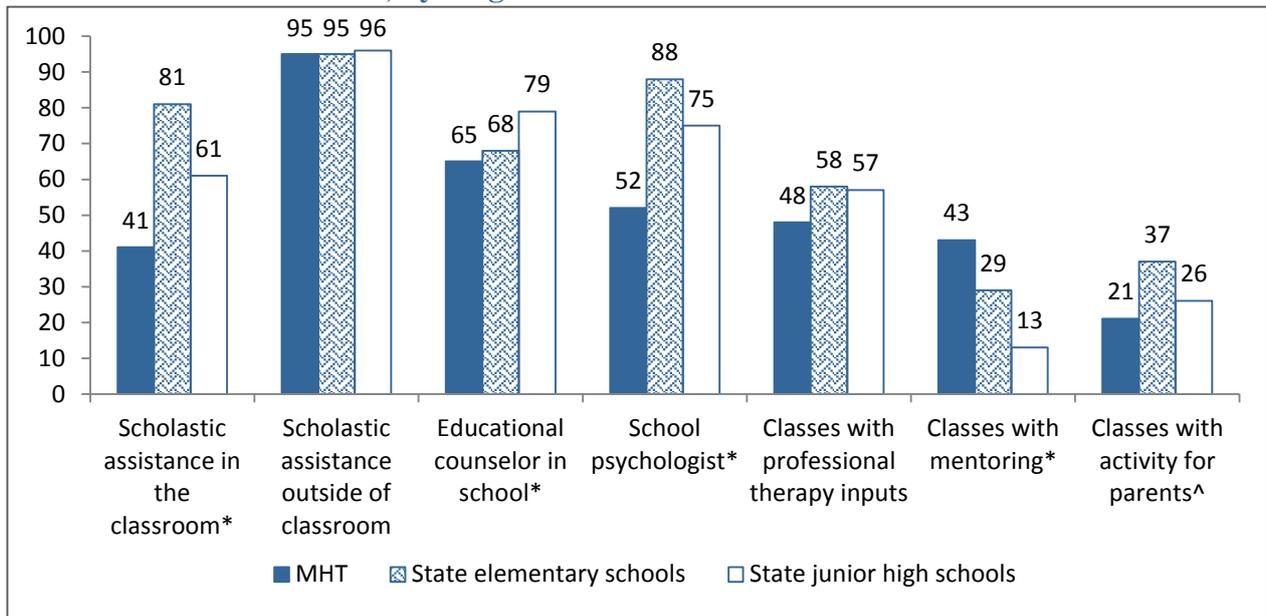
- ◆ *General preparedness of the schools to work with low achievers.* Preparedness was measured by the schools' ability to screen and identify low achievers, devise work plans, and formulate objectives for work with low achievers
- ◆ *Implementation of strategies to provide inputs to advance the students.* Inputs for the entire class include: teaching methods suitable for heterogeneous classes, additional classroom staff, and changes in the composition and size of the class. Special inputs for low achievers included: scholastic assistance in the classroom and outside of it, socio-emotional support from professionals, mentoring, and work with parents
- ◆ *Support mechanisms for the school teaching staff.* These mechanisms included: teamwork, support from the therapy staff, and training in the advancement of low achievers
- ◆ *Contact with external agencies,* such as services in the community and programs provided to the school by outside organizations.

The data provide a comprehensive picture of the schools in the network, highlight the defining characteristics of the different types of schools (boys, girls, mixed) and allow for comparisons with the national study.

3. Main Findings and Programmatic Directions

- ◆ The homeroom teachers estimated that on average almost a third (29%) of the students in their class were low achievers. This is statistically significantly higher than the average percentage in the elementary State schools (22%) and similar to that in the junior high State schools (30%).
- ◆ The findings indicate that the MHT schools - in their openness to approaches that are thought to help the students advance, and in many other aspects – cope with low achievers in similar ways to the State schools. However, the MHT schools differed significantly from their State counterparts in other aspects, such as the lower percentage of staff members with an academic (or corresponding) degree, the lower accessibility to therapy professionals at the schools, and the lower extent of contact with therapeutic services in the community (see Figures 1-3).

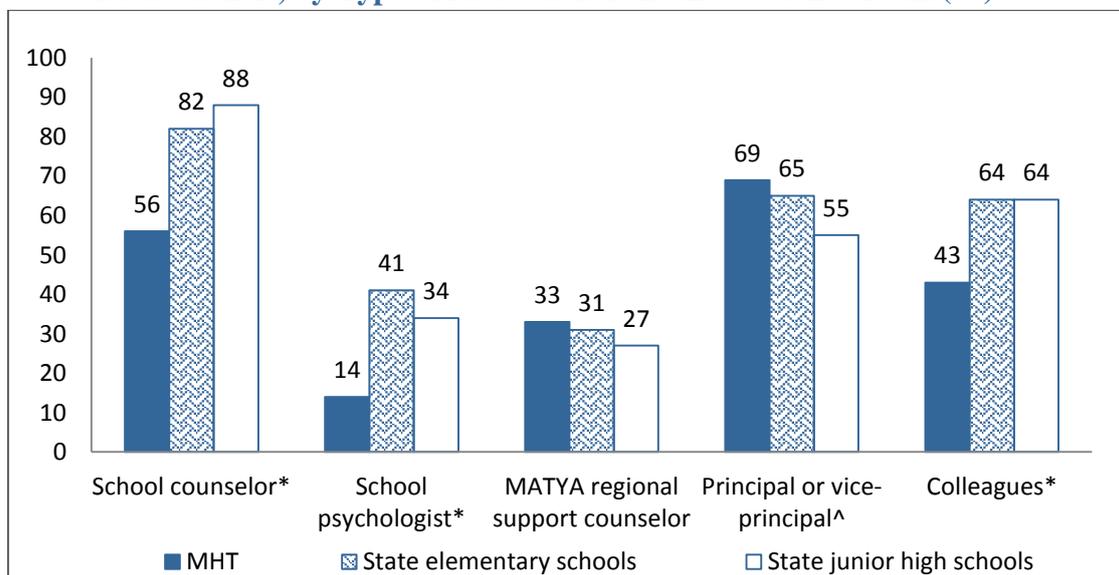
Figure 1: Percentage of Classes or Schools that have Professionals, and Types of Assistance for Low Achievers, by Stage of Education and Education Stream



* Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and State schools (elementary and junior high)

^ Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and State and State-Religious schools

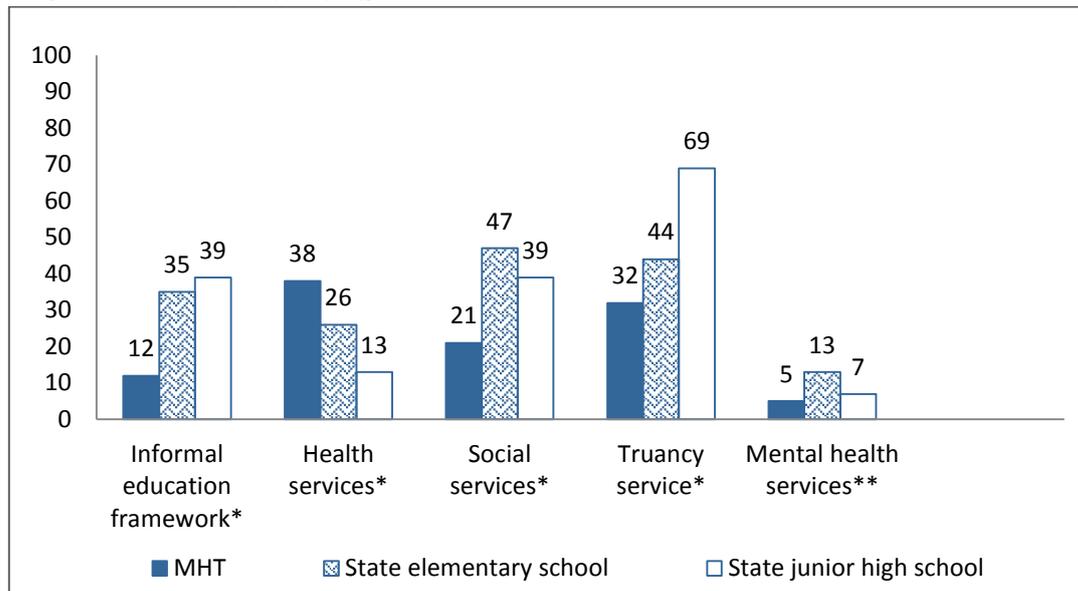
Figure 2: Percentage of Homeroom Teacher that Issued Referrals (at least one per month) to Professionals, by Type of Professional and Education Stream (%)



* Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and State schools (elementary and junior high)

^ Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and State and State-Religious junior high schools

Figure 3: Schools in Regular Contact with Services in the Community (%), by Type of Service and Education Stream

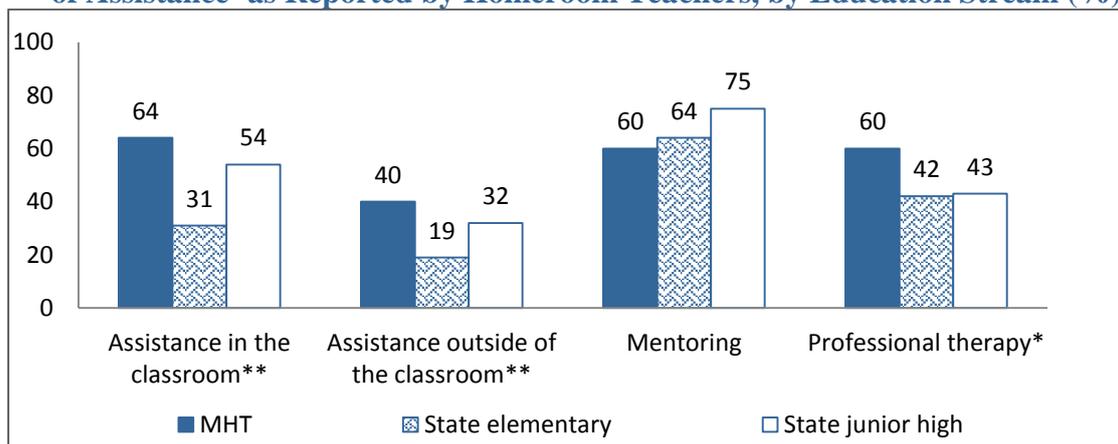


* Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and elementary and junior high schools in the State and State-Religious streams

** Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and elementary State and State-Religious schools

◆ Moreover, the findings indicate a larger amount of unmet needs in the MHT schools. The homeroom teachers estimated that about 60% of the students in need of some form of assistance (scholastic assistance, therapy or mentoring) were not receiving it (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Students Not Receiving Various Forms of Assistance out of Total Students in Need of Assistance¹ as Reported by Homeroom Teachers, by Education Stream (%)



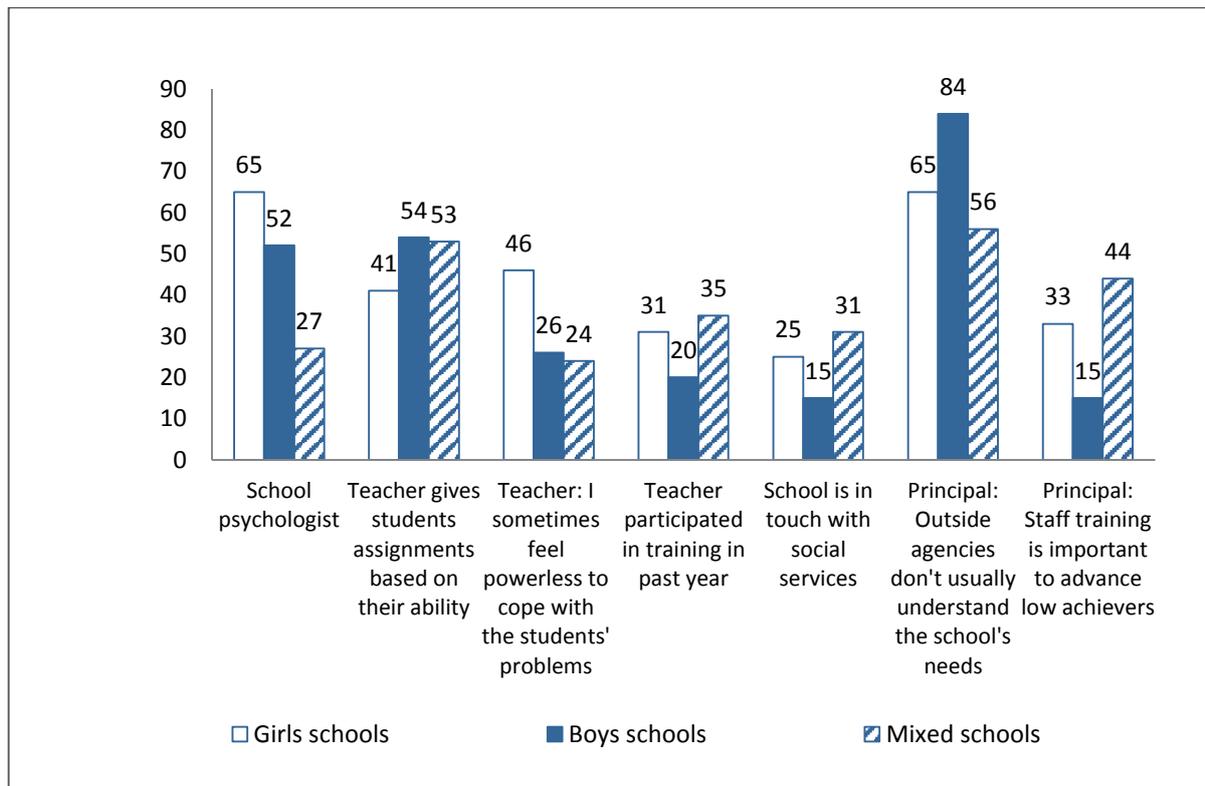
¹ Students in needs of assistance: Percentage of students receiving assistance + percentage of those whom the teachers consider to be in need of it, but who are not getting it.

* Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and elementary and junior high schools in the State and State-Religious streams.

** Statistically significant differences in χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$, between MHT schools and elementary State and State-Religious schools

- ◆ The study found that the MHT schools had developed special inputs for working with low-achieving students that sometimes served as alternatives for the inputs provided at State schools, such as the Fathers and Sons project; using staff members (who were not professional therapists) to provide emotional support; extensive use of mentoring and collaborative work with learning centers.
- ◆ Differences were found between the MHT schools serving different populations of students in terms of their work methods and needs (see Figure 5):
 - **Schools for girls:** Compared to the mixed and all-boys schools, the girls' schools were more focused on scholastic success and the meeting of State educational standards in order to facilitate their students' eventual integration into the labor market. This focus is reflected in methods that are in many aspects similar to those of State schools with regard to the professionalism of the inputs for low-achieving girls and the relatively high rate of contact with the Ministry of Education and community services. However, the difficulties reported by the homeroom teachers indicate that there are still-unmet needs in terms of coping with heterogeneous classes.
 - **Schools for boys:** Work with low-achievers at the boys' schools is characterized by heavy emphasis on traditional religious teaching methods (reading from an early age, small study groups, etc.). The orientation toward study and the commitment between the student and the institution are of primary importance, while measuring scholastic achievement according to external standards is secondary. The prevailing attitude at these schools is that scholastic difficulties should be contained as long as they do not interfere with the perceived spiritual level of the institute and the affiliation with the community. Moreover, there is less use of professional assistance to low-achieving students. This fact is reflected in the schools' low emphasis on identification and monitoring of the students' achievements and greater use of non-professional staff to provide assistance. These schools have less contact with social services and their principals express greater apprehension about the involvement of external agencies in their schools. At the same time, however, a high rate of principals feel that their staff needs guidance or additional in-service training with regard to identification of low-achieving students.
 - **Mixed schools:** These schools are contending both with a socioeconomically weaker population than the boys' and girls' schools, and with the specific challenge of coping with two separate student populations (boys and girls) within the same administrative framework. Despite these challenges, the staff of the mixed schools reported: less contact with external therapy services; a smaller therapy staff within the school; and less training for the staff. Accordingly, they reported greater difficulty coping with low-achieving students and a greater need for training.

Figure 5: Methods of Working and Attitudes towards Advancing Low-Achieving Students, by Type of School (%)



The findings reveal possible programmatic directions to strengthen the efforts of MHT schools to meet the needs of their low-achieving students, including: dissemination of strategies to advance low-achieving students in all MHT schools; arranging for resources such as the Matiyot regional support centers, which are available in the State and State-Religious streams to be accessible to MHT schools; increasing the number of therapy professionals in the school while increasing the teachers' awareness of the potential benefits of referral to a professional; examining ways to reinforce the relationship with therapy services in the community while ensuring cultural sensitivity; improving the homeroom teachers' professionalism; strengthening support mechanisms for teachers dealing with low-achievers; and strengthening training for teachers and principals. In all cases, attention should be given to the different needs of the different types of school.

Despite certain apprehensions about cooperation with external agencies and their possible interference with the ultra-Orthodox way of life, the schools are showing steadily increasing openness to acquiring knowledge and new ways of advancing low-achieving students. The willingness of the network to participate in the mapping is an additional step towards expanding the cooperation between the State system and the ultra-Orthodox schools. The mapping also represents a further step in learning about the methods of ultra-Orthodox schools in general in order to support further planning, development and assimilation of policy and appropriate methods of intervention and advancement of low-achieving students in these schools.

The study findings will be disseminated extensively and discussed in forums with professionals at the Ministry of Education, the Ma'ayan Ha'Hinuch Ha'Torani network and the schools themselves.

Acknowledgments

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