



RESEARCH REPORT

Youth Employment Programs: Lessons from the Literature and from Meitar-Susan's House

Brachi Ben Simon ♦ Paula Kahan-Strawczynski

The study was conducted at the initiative of the Division of Research, Planning and Training in cooperation with the Youth Rehabilitation Service in the Division for Adolescents, Young Adults and Correctional Services at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and funded with their assistance

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Related Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute Publications

Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Amiel, S. and Konstantinov, V. 2016. *Status of Young Adults in Israel in Key Areas of Life*. RR-736-16 (Hebrew).

Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Levi, D.; Ben Simon, B. and Sher, N. 2015. *Services and Programs for Adolescents and Young Adults at High Risk: An Integrative Analysis of Studies on the Work of the Division of Correctional Services at the Ministry of Social Affairs*. RR-696-15 (Hebrew).

Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Vazan-Sikron, L.; Naon, D.; Hadar, Y. and Konstantinov, V. 2014. *Young Adults Working in Israel with up to 12 Years of Schooling: Integration into Employment – Resources, Barriers and Needs*. RR-656-14 (Hebrew).

Naon, D.; Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Vazan-Sikron, L.; Hadar, Y. and Konstantinov, V. 2014. *Young Adults in Israel Who Are Neither Working Nor Studying: Integration into Employment – Resources, Barriers and Needs*. RR-640-14 (Hebrew).

Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Ben Simon, B. and Konstantinov, V. 2013. *The Characteristics and Needs of Youth in Youth Rehabilitation Service Programs*. RR-637-13 (Hebrew).

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Vazan-Sikron, L.; Ben Simon, B. and Kahan-Strawczynski, P. 2011. *Derech Hamelech ("The King's Way") – Mentoring Youth at Risk as Preparation for Work Life: Evaluation Study*. RR-695-11 (Hebrew).

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Ben Rabi, D.; Argov, D. and Szabo-Lael, R. 2003. *Former Miftanim Students: A Follow-up Study*. RR-433-03 (Hebrew).

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Programs preparing at-risk youth for the world of work are essential for imparting life skills and creating better opportunities for integration into the labor market. To be successful, these programs should be holistic, i.e., should incorporate a range of elements and provide a comprehensive response to different needs. In the long term, these programs are intended to improve the transition from school to work, to give at-risk youth better opportunities to enter the labor market and to provide them with tools to cope with all aspects of young adulthood (completing their education, beginning full-time employment, starting a family, moving into their own home, etc.).

Meitar-Susan's House (MSH), which is implemented by the Youth Rehabilitation Service of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA), is an example of this type of program. MSH is a rehabilitation-oriented occupational program for adolescents aged 15-18 on the disengagement spectrum (from high school students characterized as hidden dropouts to adolescents who are not in any organized framework at all). MSH is a short-term program designed to provide an opportunity for paid work as a means of rehabilitation. The program is implemented by the multidisciplinary staff of MSH and the participants learn to manufacture and market a variety of handicrafts and artwork. They gain experience in various units in the workshop, each of which specializes in a different craft, such as glasswork or beads. Here they learn the trade from artists and artisans, as well as learning life skills, soft skills and business basics. The MSH model provides individually tailored employment programs to prepare the participants to re-integrate into normative frameworks in the community.

MSH was established in Jerusalem in 2002, and has around 50 participants each year. Since its founding, some 500 adolescents have participated in the program. In 2014, a branch was established in Eilat, which was not included in the current study.

2. The Study

The study had two main goals:

1. To learn from the international literature about the characteristics of successful programs to prepare at-risk youth for working life.¹
2. To examine one of Israel's unique programs (MSH) by studying the status of its graduates several years after leaving the program.

The study was intended to serve as the basis for continued improvement and implementation of MSH and the replication of its work model.

The planned study population included all graduates of MSH who had completed the program 3-5 years prior to the survey. The program staff estimated that around 90 graduates met this criterion. The study team was given contact details of 47 graduates whom the program staff were able to contact and

¹ The literature review has been published in a separate online document (in Hebrew) that can be viewed on the MJB website <http://brookdaleheb.jdc.org.il/?CategoryID=156>

obtain their consent to participate in the study. Of these, 39 were interviewed (83% response rate). During the survey, it became evident that only about half of the respondents met the criterion and had indeed concluded their participation at least 3 years previously. This made it difficult to obtain information about areas of life that require a greater length of time to develop.

The data were collected by telephone interviews from March to May 2016. The questionnaire included information about the personal and family characteristics of the graduates, their MSH experience (including their patterns of working, satisfaction with the program and how they perceived its contributions), their first months after leaving the program, their current status in various aspects of their lives, the difficulties they were currently facing, and their expectations of the future.

The findings of the survey with respect to selected aspects of the current status of the graduates were compared to the status of all Jewish young adults in the same age range from various national surveys.

3. Main Findings

Main Insights from the Literature Review

- ◆ At-risk adolescents and young adults need to be prepared for working life right from high school, where they acquire life skills, social skills, communication skills and soft skills for the labor market. Schools can also provide their students with an opportunity for practical learning, e.g., through apprenticeships.
- ◆ Cooperation among the various systems entrusted with the care of disengaged youth, particularly between the education system and place of work, is essential.
- ◆ Successful programs to prepare participants for the working world share several characteristics: a holistic approach; intersystem cooperation; long-term supervision; awarding official certificates at the end of the program; defining the target population and tailoring a program to meet the participants' needs, employment interests and skills; providing life skills and soft skills; adjusting the contents of the training to the needs of the local market and its existing opportunities; paid work and financial incentives; utilization of developmental approaches; and offering residential programs focusing on rehabilitative education, work experience and adult mentors.
- ◆ Several factors can impede the programs from succeeding and achieving their goals. These include: lack of resources to reach out to participants and keep them committed over a long period of time; one-dimensional or short-term programs or programs that focus on the participants' needs instead of their strengths; absence of staff training and rapid staff turnover; insufficient attention to barriers preventing young adults from participating, e.g., lack of transportation and childcare.

Main Findings from the Survey of Graduates relating to their Experiences with the Program and with Integrating into Adult Life after the Program: Successes and Difficulties

Personal Characteristics

- ◆ 54% of the graduates are male and 97% are Jewish.
- ◆ At the time of the survey, ages ranged from 19-25; average age 21.2.

- ◆ 44% are immigrants or second-generation immigrants.
- ◆ 87% are unmarried.
- ◆ 64% live with their parents and 28% live in a non-family household – a far higher percentage than total Jews aged 18-24 in Israel (only 6% live in non-family households).
- ◆ 67% of the graduates are religious or observe religious tradition.

Patterns of Participation in MSH and Contributions of the Program

- ◆ On average, participants remain in the program for 18 months. The most common age upon leaving the program is 18.
- ◆ During their time in MSH, 87% of the graduates were studying in regular schools or special programs to complete matriculation, or were in high-school completion programs for dropouts. Eighteen percent had an additional job.
- ◆ 61% worked in the same department for the entire time they were in the program and did not try other crafts.
- ◆ The graduates expressed a high level of satisfaction with various aspects of the program.
- ◆ The graduates reported that the main contribution was that it imparted job skills, increased their ambition to advance in life, and improved their self-efficacy. The program contributed less to providing financial management skills, business knowledge and information about their rights, and preparing them for military service.
- ◆ 67% of the graduates remained in contact with staff members after they concluded their participation in the program, and most were still in contact at the time of the survey.

Difficulties Facing Participants in the First Year after Participating in MSH

- ◆ Leaving a structured framework and setting out on a new path is usually beset with difficulty and requires a period of adjustment. About half of the graduates reported that they had to contend with at least three types of difficulties during the year after they left MSH. A third of them reported difficulty finding work or coping with a new job, and difficulty dealing with emotional problems. About a quarter of the graduates reported difficulty finding or adjusting to an educational framework, social difficulties, difficulties in family relationships, and difficulties making a living.

Military/National Service

- ◆ 77% of the graduates have done or are doing military or national service, a similar percentage to that in the general Jewish population and slightly lower than that of graduates of residential care.
- ◆ A considerable percentage of graduates completed a meaningful service: 44% acquired a profession during their service and 20% were commanders. However, an average of 40% of the graduates experienced difficulties during their military service. The difficulties reported were generally connected with family problems, financial problems, and difficulty getting along with their commanders or obeying the rules.

Education

- ◆ The level of education is the graduates' weak point – only 33% have a full matriculation certificate, compared with 63% of Jewish young adults aged 18-24 in Israel.
- ◆ One possible explanation for these difficulties is the high percentage of learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder, which were reported by 69% of the graduates.
- ◆ However, their plans for the future indicate the importance they attribute to education – 47% reported that they plan to study in the coming year and 62% are expecting to obtain a matriculation certificate in the next five years.

Employment

- ◆ Employment is a notable strength of the graduates of MSH – most are wage-earners (66%) and have permanent (85%) and stable jobs (on average have been in the job for 11.3 months). The percentage of graduates who are employed (including those in military service) is higher than the percentage of Jewish young adults aged 18-24 in Israel – 98% vs. 67%.
- ◆ Approximately 60% of the graduates have acquired or are acquiring a profession in a formal program.
- ◆ Like all Jewish young adults in the same age range, they are working mainly in sales and services.
- ◆ It emerges that a significant percentage of the graduates are not receiving the standard fringe benefits to which they are entitled. Regarding understanding and exercising their rights, the graduates felt that the MSH program did not contribute sufficiently to their knowledge in this area. Lack of knowledge of one's rights is characteristic of all young adults, but young adults contending with financial difficulties and those without families who can support and advise them are particularly vulnerable in this area.

Financial Difficulties

- ◆ Despite the employment rate and pay that is equal or greater than the minimum wage, more than 30% of the graduates are currently struggling with financial difficulties or have done so in the past. The great majority do not receive state financial assistance (90%) or regular financial assistance from their families (95%).
- ◆ The need to contend with ongoing financial difficulties is reflected in the higher percentage of graduates who are afraid of losing their jobs than total Jewish young adults aged 20-24 in Israel – 12% vs. 6%.

Emotional Status

- ◆ Compared with all Jewish young adults in the same age range, a much higher percentage of graduates from MSH (at least twice as many) reported stress, depression, worries that keep them awake, lack of energy and a sense of loneliness.
- ◆ However, a relatively low percentage of the graduates reported difficulty coping with problems – a finding that indicates a high level of resilience despite their many difficulties.

- ◆ This resilience is reflected in their ability to seek formal assistance (from professionals and services) and informal assistance from family and friends.
- ◆ Their resilience is also expressed in their high level of functioning, for example in the areas of employment and military service.

4. Programmatic Directions

The intention of the study was to learn from the international literature about programs preparing young adults for working life and to learn from one of Israel's unique programs – MSH – about the status of its graduates in various areas of life as the basis on which to improve implementation of the program and replicate its work model. Learning the outcomes of the intervention was also intended to contribute to the program's ability to prepare the adolescents for independent adult life in the best way possible. The findings provide a broad picture of the status of the participants and indicate the strengths of the program and the areas in need of improvement. The findings will be very helpful in developing policy and in planning interventions to enhance preparation for working life.

The findings from the survey and literature review indicate several programmatic directions that can improve the outcomes of this intervention. These recommendations relate both to further development of MSH and of mechanisms to support the transition to the working world.

a. Possible Directions for Continued Development of Meitar-Susan's House

- ◆ *Promoting employment and advancement:* It appears that the work experience gained at MSH has contributed to the very high rates of employment achieved by the participants. At the same time, their low level of education may make it difficult to find work with advancement opportunities. Therefore, it is worth considering greater attention to ways of enhancing their educational achievements such as encouragement to attend school regularly, to acquire quality vocational training and to complete their schooling after they leave the program.
- ◆ *Promoting entrepreneurship:* MSH aspires to give participants the opportunity to gain experience in business entrepreneurship, but it was found that, in practice, this was only minimally realized. Additional avenues for developing this dimension should be considered.
- ◆ *Improving preparation for military service:* The IDF serves as a platform for acquiring a profession and other skills required by young adults. In order to realize the IDF's potential for preparing adolescents for adult life, the participants need to be prepared to integrate into the service as well as possible. Better preparation can reduce the difficulties experienced during military service and increase the potential benefits of the service.
- ◆ *Increasing graduates' awareness of their rights and the social benefits to which the law entitles them:* Many of the graduates do not receive social benefits at their place of work and some of them do not know or remember whether they are eligible for them. The importance of the graduates being able to exercise their legally mandated rights makes it important to address this issue.

- ◆ *Including ongoing data collection as a component of MSH:* Developing a system for ongoing data collection about the participants, including administrative data on the adolescents' characteristics, needs and strengths, can promote the improvement of processes and practices at the program level.
- ◆ *Continued support after completing the program:* The many difficulties facing the graduates in the first year after leaving MSH indicate the need to provide them with support during the initial period after leaving the program and, if possible, for an additional period afterwards.

b. Broader Efforts to Support the Transition to the World of Work for all Youth at Risk

- ◆ *Development of human capital in general and, specifically, acquisition of formal education and vocational training:* Investment in human capital (promotion of academic and vocational education and development of skills) is a key factor in easing the transition to working life and setting the adolescents on a career path. There is a need to enhance these opportunities for all youth at risk by addressing them from a broad system perspective, including career and vocational counseling that will support them in their decision-making.
- ◆ *Integrated system-wide partnerships:* To make a significant breakthrough in expanding opportunities, it is important to promote coordination and collaboration among all those addressing the development of human capital and the successful integration into the world of work.

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