



Research Article

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Underachieving, At-Risk, and Distressed Students Within the Ultra-Orthodox Education System: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This review aims to offer an integrative perspective on findings regarding the ways in which the ultra-Orthodox education system addresses challenges posed by underachieving students, as they often face distress and risk of dropping out. Findings of both male and female students within the ultra-Orthodox society are presented. The review delves into the evolving ultra-Orthodox society, highlighting changes and developments. First, characteristics of underachieving and at-risk youth in ultra-Orthodox society are described. Following this, an exploration of family relationships involving underachieving and at-risk students is presented. Finally, ultra-Orthodox institutions' attitude towards underachieving and at-risk students is examined. Consequences are discussed.

Keywords: ultra-Orthodox, underachieving, drop out, at-risk

1. Introduction

The current review set out to examine the ways in which the ultra-Orthodox education system copes with underachieving and at-risk students in Israel. The research conducted on the topic of at-risk students to date focused primarily on examining the difficulties among the population itself – students who have difficulty meeting the rigorous standards of ultra-Orthodox education – and less so on the aspects that relate to the family, the educational institution, and the community. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies investigating the broad ecological context and interrelationships between student characteristics and characteristics of social systems in which they grew up. The purpose of the current literature review is to formulate an integrative perspective on the ways in which the ultra-Orthodox education system in Israel copes with “underachieving students,” who are in distress and at risk of dropping out.

According to the ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), human development is the result of complex and reciprocal interaction between an individual and his surrounding social systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) specified several systems that are relevant to an individual and affect his development: the systems that directly envelop the individual and which he encounters face-to-face – family, the physical environment (neighborhood, peers), community systems, and both formal and

informal educational frameworks (e.g., school, community center, activities, medical services) (microsystem); the extent of synchronization between the various systems (mesosystem); social systems with which the individual is not directly involved (social services, legal institutions, media organizations) (exosystem); and social and cultural systems operating both locally and nationally (macrosystem). The school is one of the ecosystems that has a crucial impact on an individual's development, and it is considered the second most important socialization system after the family (Mor, 2020).

2. Methods

The current review examines the literature on how the ultra-Orthodox education system addresses underachieving students in distress and those at risk of dropping out. The initial search yielded 93 results, which were then subjected to exclusion criteria. We excluded publications pertaining to non-relevant contexts, resulting in the inclusion of 30 articles in the review, encompassing both male and female students in ultra-Orthodox society. Given the relatively small and understudied Ultra-Orthodox community, the review incorporated both qualitative and quantitative studies, including doctoral dissertations and master's theses.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics of Underachieving and At-Risk Youth in Ultra-Orthodox Society

3.1.1 Females

Learning difficulties and learning disabilities. In ultra-Orthodox society, as in the general society, learning difficulties at school and poor academic achievement give rise to severe feelings of frustration and helplessness. Adolescent girls who experience learning difficulties due to learning disabilities and/or attention and concentration deficits, exhibit average or below average achievements; even after they have exerted a lot of effort, they continue to fail which leads them to avoid academic activity, both passively and by disengaging (Kelly, 2010; Ovadia, 2015; Stub, 2017).

The crisis of adolescence. Studies report a phenomenon in which the girl's expectation is that the adults in her environment will allow her to have this period of evaluation and search for falsehoods, but instead she experiences alienation and rejection. Her attempts to restore her own self-trust and confidence in her abilities, as well as to regain control over her life, may be perceived by her environment as defiance and even lead to an escalation and aggravation of the condition (Guttman, 2018a; Guttman, 2018b, Ovadia, 2015; Kelly, 2010; Kelly, 2014; Schwartz, 2003; Werber & Lee, 2017).

Psychological distress and self-destruction. In contrast to boys, girls who are severely neglected and who have experienced severe harm, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse or any other trauma suffer from internalizing symptoms such as depression, low self-esteem and poor body image. Girls who suffer from severe psychological distress tend to exhibit self-destructive behaviors such as self-harm or self-mutilation, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and even suicide attempts and running away from home, which lead to a real risk of being sexually and emotionally exploited (Guttman, 2018a; Horowitz, 2018; 2017; Ovadia, 2015; UJA, 2003;).

Expressions of defiant behavior among adolescent girls. Identity-seeking in adolescence is sometimes fraught with an attempt to rebel against the observance of the mitzvahs and ultra-Orthodox values. Attempts by adults to "force" the girl to keep the mitzvahs because of how it will appear to others if she does not is likely to cause the adolescent girl to feel distrustful of adults and the system (Guttman, 2018a). Girls who have begun to challenge conventions within the strict seminaries describe situations in which a girl poses a question about faith and is met with an evasive response followed by an intrusive investigation into her actions, beliefs, and even her purse (Horowitz, 2018). When questions about faith are met with unsatisfactory responses from

adults, it fills the adolescent girl with feelings of loneliness and of being trapped in a world of contradictions. Sometimes when a girl is in a process of self-rehabilitation, she views the observance of the mitzvahs as a threat to her existence and to her identity formation. In her perspective, the very observance of ultra-Orthodox mitzvahs or customs is the source of her problems (Guttman, 2018a; Ovadia, 2015; Rotenberg, 2020).

3.1.2 Males

Learning difficulties and learning disabilities. The ultra-Orthodox cultural educational approach places learning at the center both socially and spiritually. Thus, learning difficulties and learning disabilities become a major factor in students dropping out of ultra-Orthodox learning frameworks. Ongoing coping with learning difficulties and limitations creates a sense of lack of belonging and lack of spiritual fulfillment, which are experienced as a constant clash with the demands, and results in being pushed to the fringes of society (Efroni, 2016). Continued academic failure leads to behavioral problems and constitutes a salient cause of dropping out, because learning abilities are not diagnosed and therefore not appropriately addressed by the system (Efrati-Munitz, 2003; Rodriguez, 2006; Yogev, 2013).

Disciplinary and behavioral problems. In the ultra-Orthodox educational institutions, any deviation from the confines of permissible behavior leads to harsh and severe treatment toward the adolescent and his parents and puts the boy at risk of dropping out from the educational setting, even among boys who excel in their studies (Efrati-Munitz, 2003; Rodriguez, 2006). Educational staff often tend to fail to understand the adolescent, who in response expresses his distress in a broader range of non-normative behaviors. This creates a cycle of escalation that increases the boy's likelihood of being expelled from the setting and may lead to violent and criminal patterns of behavior (Rodriguez, 2006; Yogev, 2013).

The crisis of adolescence. In the sensitive period of adolescence, harsh treatment by significant adults in ultra-Orthodox socialization systems may suppress this normative phase of searching and making mistakes, and subsequently impair the adolescent's formation of identity, consciousness, and independent thought (Efrati-Munitz, 2003; Erickson, 1963; Marcia, 1980; Plum, 1995; Yogev, 2013). Ultra-Orthodox society, by its nature, tends to limit or prohibit adolescents' opportunities and thus diminishes or prevents the exploration process essential for identity formation (Barzilai, 2001; Efrati-Munitz, 2003; Fisherman, 2002; Gelb, 2020; Rodriguez, 2006; Tzuriel, 1990). Adolescents who feel that the systems do not allow them to explore are likely to feel that the community condemns and rejects them. Their very desire to belong in order to form their identity may lead them to connect with marginalized groups and to engage in negative acts such as doing drugs and delinquency (Danon, 1998; Efrati-Munitz, 2003).

Questioning one's faith and a reduction in the level of spirituality. The dropout phenomenon within the context of ultra-Orthodox education has been on the rise in recent years and has made an impact in the ultra-Orthodox sector and on the professional bodies that address dropout, because dropping out of school is not only perceived as withdrawing from the educational institution but is also sometimes associated with a decline in the level of religiosity (Weiniger, 2015). The ultra-Orthodox society places the mitzvah to study Torah at the center of its social ethos and sanctifies it. For a believer, his very soul is hanging in the balance and thus, experiencing difficulties in studying the Torah leads to a complex mental struggle and a feeling that one is unable to reach spiritual self-realization (Efroni, 2015).

3.2 Family Relationships Among Underachieving and At-Risk Students

According to Ovadia (2015), ultra-Orthodox adolescent girls who are in the process of dropping out, often must cope with the challenges of the withdrawal process on their own, without guidance or support. At the beginning of the dropout process, when the adolescent does not behave in

accordance with the house and community rules, she may experience rejection from her friends and family. In the absence of family support, her feelings of frustration, loneliness, and despair increase (Ovadia, 2015). Nonetheless, the parents experience difficulty in helping their daughter due to their worry about the harm that could be caused to her and to the rest of the family members (Guttman, 2018a; Guttman, 2018b; Kelly, 2010; Ovadia, 2015a; Ovadia, 2015b; Werber & Lee, 2017). Parents may try to rush their daughter's entry into marriage in order to avoid a deterioration of the situation (Horowitz, 2018). In other cases, the dropout period creates a division between the parents – one being more supportive and the other being abhorrent and sometimes abusive (Kelly, 2010, 2014).

A survey conducted by Yogev (2013), which was designed to identify the characteristics of at-risk ultra-Orthodox youth and those at risk for disengaging, found that the demand put on them to be high-achieving and a concern over the family's image and status in the community, are key components of how the family responds to their child's behavior, and ones that are likely to lead to the adolescent to leave the family. Another study (Itzhaki et al., 2020) found that a reduction in a boy's religiosity level was associated with the extent to which he felt that his parents treat him is conditional on his behavior. Sorotzkin (2002) describes the heavy price that parents in ultra-Orthodox society pay to avoid the discomfort of acknowledging their role in their children's problems: parents who neglect their children's emotional lives by giving undue importance to their children's behavior in public; rigid and inflexible parents, who tend to overreact to their children's difficulties; parents who abuse their children overtly or covertly; parents who put pressure on their children to appease the family.

3.3 *Ultra-Orthodox Institutions' Attitude Toward Underachieving and At-Risk Students*

3.3.1 *Females*

Girls in the ultra-Orthodox community are expected to observe religious lifestyles and to adhere to codes of modesty and obedience to authority. Any manifestation of rebellion may be perceived as a sign of her and her family's downfall (Guttman, 2018b; Korman, 2012; Schwartz 2003; Kelly, 2014). Alongside the community's promise of solidarity, benevolence, and altruism, intense feelings of disappointment and anger arise among girls who do not follow the normative path. Representatives of the community, who act out of a deep concern for the girls and their families, sometimes take actions such as trying to marry the girl off or to send her abroad to be "re-educated" (Rotenberg, 2020; Schwartz, 2003).

Many girls experience internal struggles that are not always understood by adults. These struggles manifest in their engaging in unacceptable actions, which often lead to adults taking a harsh attitude with them which consequently prompts a cycle of exclusion (Stub, 2017). Sometimes these girls have not yet left the ultra-Orthodox community in the physical sense, but rather in thought, and sometimes also in action such that they have withdrawn from the ultra-Orthodox community in a metaphysical sense. This represents a type of intermediary status such that there are gaps between the girl's behavior and the environment's perception of her, and how she perceives and defines herself (Ovadia, 2015b; Stub, 2017). The rehabilitation processes for these girls are related to creating a sense of continuity in perspectives and way of life across the present, the past and the future in a way that fosters their ability to take responsibility for themselves and choose the right way of life for themselves (Korman, 2012).

In ultra-Orthodox society, deviating from the rules is perceived as a danger to the community. Ultra-Orthodox girls encounter more stigma than boys and have more difficulty recovering after engaging in unacceptable behaviors. The matchmaking system is harder for girls than boys and the threat of not being deemed worthy for a Shidduch is paralyzing. Feelings of shame and the real worry that the deviant behaviors will tarnish the family name and harm her brothers' and sisters' likelihood of acceptance into a reputable school and attaining a suitable match (for marriage), further increases the likelihood for her to hide what she's going through and not seek professional help (UJA, 2003).

Ultra-Orthodox girls are on a quick and slippery slope, which can quickly escalate into social exclusion and a rift between themselves and their parents, and lead to their dropping out of the educational framework and deviating from the normative path. Girls on this path perceive themselves as experiencing one emotional injury after another and as standing alone within a society that sentences her to loneliness. As a result of a girl's inability to cope with her distress on her own, especially for those who have suffered trauma, including psychological, sexual, or another type of harm, she may find support in the streets, which proves to the family and community that her exclusion was indeed justified (Fas et al., 2011; Guttman, 2018a; Horowitz, 2018; Korman, 2012; Ovadia, 2015; Rosman, 2020; UJA, 2003).

In extreme cases, the girl arrives to the streets and becomes part of a group of disengaged youth ("Shababnikim") who are characterized by delinquency, and drug and alcohol use (Fas et al., 2011). Some of these young girls are exploited within the group to which they belong, and others become victims outside of ultra-Orthodox society (Horowitz, 2018). Similar to the general society, in the ultra-Orthodox society, the age at which adolescent girls are deemed at-risk has decreased over the years. If, in the past, the age was 15-16, today there are girls who are in this situation at the age of 12 or 13 (Korman, 2012; Schwartz, 2003).

Many researchers, educators, and therapists have emphasized the speed at which the circumstances of ultra-Orthodox girls can deteriorate, and the extreme situations that they can reach in a very short time (Fas et al., 2011; Guttman, 2018b; Horowitz, 2018; Kelly, 2014; Korman, 2012; Rosman, 2020; Rotenberg, 2020; Schwartz, 2003; Stub, 2017). In contrast to adolescent boys, who often form gangs and provide each other with support, girls find themselves intensely lonely (Guttman, 2018a). This disparity between the values and customs of the family and that of the educational institution, makes the girl's integration into school difficult and further increases her likelihood to conceal what she's going through and avoid seeking help (Kelly, 2010; Ovadia, 2015b). Studies indicate that some ultra-Orthodox girls who drop out are from welfare families or families with a low social status within the ultra-Orthodox community (Kelly, 2014; Bart, 2020).

The dropout of adolescent girls impedes their ability to attain a respectable profession such as a teacher and, at the same time, makes them unsuitable to serve as community representatives (Schwartz, 2003). Failure to meet the rigorous requirements and regulations of the seminary sometimes leads to situations in which the teacher tries to "straighten out" the girl, to warn her and her parents about the deviant behavior and to take steps to ensure that the rest of the girls understand that the behavior is unacceptable (Guttman, 2018b). Ultra-Orthodox girls, primarily of Sephardic descent, experience situations of rejection in their transition to seminary, which they experience as an arbitrary rejection related to discrimination, and which causes them to feel immense frustration and anger (Horowitz, 2018).

There are schools that do not find a way to help girls who are experiencing internal struggles. The girls, who yearn for help, encounter adults who are unable to provide support for their distress (Guttman, 2018; Horowitz, 2018; Werber & Lee, 2017). In Werber and Lee's (2017) study, the girls describe being treated in a contradictory manner - concern and compassion on the one hand, and unsympathetic harsh judgment that finds her guilty. The lack of an opportunity for real discourse about the behaviors that deviate from the norm, and the lack of guidance and emotional support, leads to a complete distrust in her educators (Ovadia, 2015b; Stub, 2017; Werber & Lee, 2017). In situations in which, over time, the girl does not receive support from adults within the educational institution, she transfers from one educational framework to another, leaves or finds herself outside of the system (Stub, 2017; Werber & Lee, 2017).

The teacher's ability to form a deep connection with the student and get to know her as a whole person, enables her to keep the girl in the institution even in the event of a breach of the codes. The connections that exist due to the teacher's efforts pave the way for the student to successfully cope with hardship (Rotem & Ben Rabbi, 2016). This approach requires that the educational framework relax its critical treatment for a period of time and lessen its attempt to change the girl, in such a way that allows her to regain trust in the adults in her environment and thereby connect with herself

(Ovadia, 2015b). Many female researchers and professionals express hope that it is possible to increase teachers' consciousness, deepen their understanding of the girls' needs, and increase their perceptiveness in a way that helps them discern the message that is not expressed in words or behaviors (Rotenberg, 2020).

3.3.2 Males

The community in which the adolescent boy lives represents the group to which he belongs, and the perception of the community regarding the boy's characteristics and his behaviors may cause him to be rejected (Yogev, 2013). The ultra-Orthodox education system for boys is becoming a system for those who fit the prototype of the "smart student," which increases the level of competitiveness and achievements, and positions those who do not meet that prototype and who do not have a supportive family and community to help them find suitable solutions, at risk of dropping out. Thus, long study hours, a homogenous curriculum that is primarily focused on learning Gemara, a lack of basic pedagogical training for yeshiva teachers, all increase a sense of personal failure and a lack of belonging even among students who belong to the main religious denomination but experience learning difficulties and learning disabilities (Ben Rabbi et al., 2014; Gonen et al., 2016; Hanani, 2016; Horowitz, 2012; Lahev, 2015; Yogev, 2013).

In the absence of alternative work and study paths, the "dropouts" find themselves without a legitimate framework to take part in, such as those that exist for dropouts in secular educational systems in Israel – vocational training, evening classes, etc. Thus, dropping out leads to loitering in the streets, in places that are not suitable for yeshiva boys and girls. Some dropouts even experience a downturn into severe delinquency and are involved in violent robberies, vandalism, fraud, theft and extortion, prostitution, and drug use (Efrati-Munitz, 2003).

4. Cultural Influences on Perceptions of Underachievement and At-Risk Behavior

Motivational theories of academic engagement propose that students' academic expectations, perception of competence, and beliefs regarding future performance on academic tasks, collectively influence their participation and persistence in academic domains (Dweck, 1986; Eccles et al., 1983). Research indicates that cultural factors must be taken into consideration when addressing the value students place on academic success (Boykin et al., 2005). A student's belief in their ability to succeed academically is fundamental to their academic achievement (Williams, 2013). This is encapsulated in the concept of academic self-concept, which refers to a student's perception of their efficacy in academic tasks (McGrew, 2007). Academic self-concept significantly contributes to overall self-concept (Muijs, 1997) and consistently predicts academic achievement (Awad, 2007; Cokley & Patel, 2007; Williams, 2013).

Numerous studies have investigated cultural factors such as norms and values that may influence perceptions of underachievement and at-risk behavior among students (Chee, Shorty, & Robinson-Kurpius, 2019; Gonzales et al., 2008; Meza, 2008; Williams, 2013). These studies underscore the pivotal role of cultural factors in shaping beliefs about academic abilities, actual academic achievements, and overall well-being. Specifically, beliefs in task self-efficacy and cultural congruity have been linked to lower academic stress (Chee et al., 2019), while adherence to cultural values, positive perceptions of academic institutions, and positive psychological functioning have predicted academic persistence (Meza, 2008). Additionally, some cultures imbue a strong sense of family obligation, particularly concerning academic performance (Gonzales et al., 2008). While Gonzales et al. (2008) focused on immigrants, similar dynamics are observed in the Ultra-Orthodox community, where meeting parental and communal expectations is paramount (Guttman, 2018a; Guttman, 2018b; Kelly, 2010; Ovadia, 2015a; Ovadia, 2015b; Werber & Lee, 2017). Cultural values consistently emerge as robust predictors of academic and behavioral outcomes (Gonzales et al., 2008). These findings highlight the positive effects of adherence to cultural norms, but at the same time underscore the

significant difficulties and stress faced by underachieving at-risk children and adolescents who fail to meet these expectations.

These findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive therapeutic and educational interventions (Gonzales et al., 2008). By incorporating cultural values, interventions can leverage crucial cultural resources (Garcia-Coll et al., 2000). Group interventions that address students' perceptions of their academic surroundings and facilitate the development of efficient coping strategies, alongside comprehensive support structures within schools (e.g., tutoring, counselling, financial aid, academic advising), may be particularly effective (Williams, 2013). Williams (2013) also advocates for interventions that provide at-risk students with opportunities to share experiences with older students, fostering support and bolstering older students' self-efficacy and self-esteem. Moreover, enhancing connections can foster a sense of community and belonging.

5. Conclusions and Consequences

Considering the findings regarding cultural factors influencing perceptions of underachievement and at-risk youth, an integrative view of the studies included in the review portrays the type of effects that derive from the unique characteristics of ultra-Orthodox families, children and adolescents and the unique characteristics of the community itself, as reflected in the operation of the educational system and schools. The studies in the review demonstrate the tendency in the community to avoid acknowledging the unique expressions of distress among females. A comprehensive look at the findings also reveals the dropout path characteristic of males. These adolescents often experience persistent unresponsiveness to their needs, then disengage from the group to which they belong and report to vagrancy and idleness and in extreme situations, even join marginalized groups.

The conclusions arising from this review lead to the clear understanding that there is a need for professionals to enter the educational institutions such as counselors and psychologists, as well as the integration of professional training programs that provide teachers with knowledge and tools. The shortage of such professionals is probably due to the strict adherence to having the professional's denomination match the specific denomination that is being taught in each institution. The centrality of the school as a space for learning and development in every community, and especially within the ultra-Orthodox society, highlights the importance of such change. High cultural sensitivity is indeed crucial, as demonstrated in numerous studies on culture and academic performance. In addition to educating professionals about the community and its cultural norms and values, it is worthwhile to consider the establishment of mentoring programs where older students from the Ultra-Orthodox community serve as mentors. These mentors can offer the specific nuances of support needed for students within this community. These perspectives and practices are necessary not only to prevent dropout, but also to provide struggling students with legitimate avenues for fulfillment and progress while continuing to be an integral part of the community and society. Nevertheless, all these changes and processes must be led with great respect to the ultra-Orthodox core values and nature.

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