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The Yeholot Association's method for increasing the number of those eligible for a matriculation certificate

Everyone is able!

“Not a slogan, but a fact.”

Nissim Cohen – founder and director of the Yeholot Association at the Rashi Foundation, gives real validity to the slogan beloved by educators, “**Everyone is able!**” The association he heads provides thousands of students, former hidden dropouts, with a matriculation certificate and a new future.

Yoram Harpaz

In September, education journalists competed to report about the Beit Jann Comprehensive School, which increased its matriculation eligibility rate to 100% within a few years. The school, located in one of Israel's poor Druze communities, overtook schools in the most well-established localities in the center of the country. This success has many people behind it – the teachers, the principal, the Head of Druze Education at the Ministry of Education, the Director of the Northern District at the Ministry of Education, and more. One of those responsible, who gives credit to everyone during this interview, and is worried that I might give him too much credit, is Nissim Cohen.

Cohen established the Yeholot Association, within the Rashi Foundation (see box), and he is the director. The Yeholot Association is the engine pulling the wagon of Beit Jann Comprehensive School, and other wagons – schools in Israel's periphery. The Marker's educational supplement places Cohen in the list of “100 influencers on education in Israel” for 2013. The influence of Cohen and his organization is not realizing its potential; it has the ability to expand and reach every school in the entire periphery of the State of Israel.

Nissim Cohen shows me an endless number of presentations full of tables and graphs, and enthusiastically communicates the rise from year to year in those eligible for a matriculation certificate in schools where the association is involved. The “Beit Jann miracle” is not the only one. Other schools where the Yeholot Association operates are rapidly increasing their rate of matriculation eligibility. The Association is flattening the bell curve in almost every school it works in. “Everyone is able!” repeats Cohen, “It's not a slogan. These are the facts.”

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Nissim (Max) Cohen was born in Agadir in Morocco in 1957. His family immigrated to Israel in 1960 and settled in Beit Shemesh. He dropped out of school in 11th grade. He enlisted in the Paratroopers Brigade, and after his army service, completed his matriculation certificate in an external school. He studied Sociology and Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and was awarded an M.A. magna cum laude.

He developed his Accelerated Narrowing of the Gaps Method during the early 1990s, and implemented it in various frameworks in the periphery. He became famous in the mid-1990s, after creating a revolution in the number of those eligible for a matriculation certificate in Yeruham, as part of the “everyone is able!” program. Afterwards, in the Ministry of Education’s Shahar Department, he established the Ometz program together with partners, directed it, and implemented his method in it. In 2011, he moved to the Rashi Foundation, where he established and directed the Tafnit program. The program became the Yeholot Association (see box). Cohen is married and has three children.

Like other teachers, you are rehabilitating yourself from the education system, by developing an educational program aimed at students who behave similarly to the way you did.

“Yes, to a certain extent. In my childhood and youth in Beit Shemesh, I experienced being considered “in need of nurture” and the “integration” which then ruled the schools in the periphery. I saw the system of tracking there which selected the periphery youth for vocational education using scholarly excuses.



Picture: Rafi Kotz
Nissim Cohen: “In every school, we need to set up a staff of teachers who are expert in teaching the population of hidden dropouts.

Immediately after I dropped out of school, I decided to study education at university and work in education.”

Is everyone able?

“Everyone can succeed at school and also graduate with a matriculation certificate. Apart from a tiny proportion of exceptional students, everyone has the required cognitive level to succeed at school. There are students who need more time, emotional support, a suitable environment – but they can all succeed at school and attain a matriculation certificate. Of course, even after the correct help for students who have difficulties at school, there will be variance in their grades, but this variance will not be dependent on their socioeconomic background. For us, the statement, “everyone is able”

is a belief which has become a fact.”

The bell curve is not a necessity. It can and must be flattened.

“The bell curve, instilled in the heads of educators on all levels, is a self-fulfilling prophesy. The “normal” distribution, which it supposedly reflects, gives legitimacy to students’ failing at school. Moreover, it enables, or even encourages, it. A teacher encounters her 1st grade students for the first time, and already knows that, according to the principle of normal distribution, some of her students will fail; she anticipates these failures, and it is, therefore, expected that they will happen.”

But the psychometric tests also draw a bell curve. That’s life: A few succeed and many fail. That’s also logic: The definition of “the successful” is dependent on the definition of “the failures” and vice versa.

“Maybe that’s how it is in life and logic, but not at school – at school everyone can and must succeed according to the universal index – eligibility for a matriculation certificate. Setting aside their cultural biases, the psychometric tests measure cognitive skills at a given time; they make us forget the fact that cognitive skills are, to a great extent, a result of the socioeconomic and emotional-motivational situation. A series of unnecessary failures suppress many students’ cognitive skills. Students with normal or high cognitive potential stop believing in themselves, stop making an effort, and leave the game. In the school, the situation is “twisted” because we are “twisting” it. With the correct educational work, we can straighten it.

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The source of success or failure at school is not potential cognitive ability, but socioeconomic situation.

“Correspondence between scholastic achievements and socioeconomic background is a known fact; it is expressed in the results of the standardized 'Meitzav' school exams and matriculation tests.

The rate of students from well-established localities who study in academic institutions is double those from the periphery. Do students from the well-established localities have better cognitive skills than those from the periphery? Certainly not. The existing correspondence between demographic variables and scholastic achievements is not due to cause and effect; the problem is not due to students’ abilities, but their surrounding conditions”.

Your organization clearly demonstrates this.

“Indeed. The “Start” Program for Academia [see box] accepts at-risk students, the lowest achieving students in the 9th grade, students who have experienced many failures, and students on the verge of dropout. Teachers and school principals who participate in the program bring them to finish their studies at school, with the majority being awarded a matriculation certificate.

Look at the figures: In 5773 (2012/13), around 540 students from 17 comprehensive schools in the periphery graduated 12th grade in the “Start” Program for Academia, and the figures show that 71% are eligible for matriculation, enabling them to be accepted for academic studies. The program data is being examined at Tel Aviv University.

In 2008, researchers from Ben-Gurion University compared the achievements of Start students to a control group. At the end of 12th grade, 53% of the students who had begun

their studies in Start, earned a matriculation certificate, as compared to 0% (!) in the control group.

In the Last Hurdle for Matriculation Program [see box], the principals, teachers and coordinators from the schools participating in the program, succeeded in leading over 90% of the students annually to success in the matriculation tests – students who the school had expected to fail. The students’ successes in Start and Last Hurdle occurred without a change in their socioeconomic background, ethnic origin, or parental culture.”

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An interesting paradox: The matriculation examinations which usually make the periphery students fail, have become, for you, a lever for their advancement.

“Right. We use the matriculation examinations as a reverse tool; for us, they are a tool for freedom. A student who succeeds in the matriculation examinations not only acquires a certificate which will open doors for him, but much more: he rebuilds his faith in himself, strengthens his internal locus of control, improves his behavior, strengthens his sense of social belonging, and begins to see a future – often in academia.”

Preparation for matriculation is only an excuse for a more thorough educational process.

“The preparation for the matriculation examinations is much more than preparation for the matriculation. Success in the matriculation examinations shows the students that they can succeed in the universal arena, the matriculation arena which everyone wants to succeed in, and therefore this success has a great influence on the student’s personality, and motivates him to further successes in other areas of life. According to IDF figures, 94% of the program graduates enlist in the army, in comparison to 75% in Israel. A Tel Aviv University survey to be published soon shows that 31% of the graduates of the first Start group, which ended 7 years ago, continued on to study in academia, as compared to 36.1% of all Israeli high school graduates. And bear in mind, we are discussing students whose starting point was a collection of failures.”

“We are bridging scholastic gaps through short and intensive periods of accelerated learning, in which the students acquire bodies of knowledge and skills. We are shattering the usual duration for study in schools, creating new expanses in time and space, and holding study at high temperatures in them.”

Matriculation success has a shaping influence.

“Take for example what one of our graduates says to the interviewer during the Tel Aviv University survey from 2011 of our graduates. The interviewer asks, “What did you learn about yourself?” and he answers, “That I can do everything. If you want, you can do anything. Before that I’d never thought of that, it didn’t occupy me too much, studying [...]. At the beginning they explain it to you like a little child, and you slowly start to understand it better; then you go up, up, up, until you start gathering more self confidence. You really start to believe in yourself more. And that’s one of the most important things which we need to give every child in the country.”

And here’s what a graduate of our program tells the interviewer, “everyone said you won’t succeed, everyone said you don’t deserve a matriculation certificate, but here, you can succeed [...]. When I got the certificate, when they saw my grades were really good, my father cried. He told me that he felt he was losing me and something was slipping between his fingers, because he knew I was a clever girl. And after the program

had finished, and I saw that I had a matriculation certificate, I said to myself, ‘Wow, I did it!’ My dad was the proudest person in the world. He cried at the ceremony and said that he’d found me again [...]. I’m talking to you here about grades, but the grades are not what are important”.

“Take note, ‘but the grades are not what’s important;’ we’re rebuilding self-image, the sense of efficacy, and the experience of the self-worth of these students, and opening up new possibilities to them”.

Self-image is critical.

“Think about it: a child arrives in 1st grade with his parents; he’s excited, he wants to succeed, he thinks he’ll succeed. And then there are a series of failures which erode his self-confidence, harm his motivation to study, lead him to despair. There is a snowball effect. The despair expands into circles around the child; it transfers to the parents, teachers, and friends. They transmit it to him, “You’re a failure. You haven’t got a chance.” He stops functioning as a student, he’s in hidden dropout, maybe actual, maybe he turns to some non-legitimate alternative, to social deviation, wants to take revenge on the society which made him fail. We want to save that student – for his sake, and for the sake of society”.

A difficult task. Are there failures too?

“Certainly there are failures. We don’t hide them. We try to learn from them. There are schools where the rate of students eligible for matriculation is low, despite all the work we’ve done”.

What are the conditions for the success of the program?

“We offer the school’s teachers a method, guidance, teaching hours, and additional support. But the program’s success is dependent on the support it receives from all the involved parties. If the school administration, the inspectorate, the teachers, and the local authority don’t rally around, the program will have difficulty in succeeding. The program needs a coalition of all the educational parties”.

“The bell curve, instilled in the heads of educators on all levels, is a self-fulfilling prophesy. The “normal” distribution, which is supposedly indicative, gives legitimacy to students’ failing at school. Moreover, it enables, or even encourages, it.”

Most of the work is done by the school’s teachers. You give the direction and backup spirit, but the people doing the work with the students are their teachers.

“This is an important principle for us: the school’s teachers work with the students – even if they haven’t succeeded with them until now in the regular lessons. This method strengthens the school and the teachers. We train the teachers and accompany them, but the teachers do the work. They are the real heroes.”

So you also train the teachers while you’re at it. Teachers who learn and work in your program go back to their regular classes, armed with a new approach and method.

“Right. Principals and teachers tell us, and we also have proof, that the teachers go back to their classrooms with more awareness and more effectiveness. After they have gone through our program, they are not only convinced that every student is able, but also that every teacher is able – to motivate his students to study and get them to achieve.

After working with us, not only do these teachers succeed in our classes, but in their regular classes as well; they help all the students achieve better results. In principle, our method is suitable for all teachers and students.”



What is the method?

“The sociology of education notes two main groups of variables which explain the lack of success of the students of the lowest status in the school. Variables outside the school, such as a lack of encouragement or support of “significant others”, a lack of positive models to copy, and others; and variables within the school, such as the prevailing culture of the school, low expectations, sorting children into different tracks, “forgiving” curricula, etc.

“Addressing these two groups of variables can prevent or significantly reduce gaps between the achievements of the children from privileged and underprivileged families. But the students included in our program at the end of 9th grade, have already accrued gaps and many failures. Therefore, we need to address two kinds of additional problems: the gap in skills and knowledge created over 9 years of study, and the students’ false awareness which says, ‘I am not able.’”

So your program attempts to provide solutions in these four areas: variables external and internal to the school, scholastic gaps, and self-image.

“Right. These, briefly, are our solutions to the above problems: “External variables: a homeroom teacher or coordinator who also addresses the students’ emotional needs as part of his role – listens, supports, nurtures higher expectations. This person is familiar with the family from which the student comes and views him holistically.

“Variables within the school: the program offers scholastic challenges for the students. The students gain experience in structured/ track mobility in the school – they study seriously and are put up to higher groups, a result of hard work which brings success. Just by his joining the program, the student is directed toward mobility, since the program is academic and focused on the matriculation examinations. “Scholastic gaps: we bridge them through short and intensive periods of accelerated learning, in which the students acquire bodies of knowledge and skills. We are shattering the usual duration for study in schools, creating new expanses in time and space, and using them to conduct intensive study. We are not talking about quick and superficial study, but rather extremely effective learning which closes scholastic gaps created over several years.

The Yeholot Association

The Yeholot Association was born out of the Tafnit Program, which was established in 2001 by the Rashi Foundation, and the Ministry of Education – Southern District. The Program was based on the Accelerated Narrowing of the Gaps Method, which Nissim Cohen had developed during the early 1990s. Three years ago, the Tafnit Program became the Yeholot Association. The Chairman of the Board is Gil Shwed, the founder and CEO at Check Point Software Technologies.

The Yeholot Association comprises several programs:

The “Start” Program for Academia which accepts the lowest achieving students in 9th grade, most with 7 failing grades. The program lasts for three years, from 10th to 12th grades, and is based on accelerated learning which

takes place in designated classes during and after school hours. Through the program, the students acquire study skills, behavioral skills, a sense of belonging, faith in their abilities, scholastic achievements and finally – a matriculation certificate. The program is operated by the school principal and teachers, under the Association’s direction. This year, the program includes around 3,000 students in 30 schools – Jews, Bedouins, and Druze.

“Start” – for Academia encourages its graduates to pursue higher education and helps with tuition scholarships.

The– “Last Hurdle” for Matriculation Program is aimed at 11th-12th graders who have failed and those for whom the school is of the opinion that they will not succeed in one to three matriculation subjects, which serve as a last hurdle to their eligibility for a matriculation certificate. This year, the program includes around 2,000 students in 65 schools.

Academia is a program for 10th graders with mediocre grades. It helps them earn a high-quality matriculation certificate and aids the graduates with tuition scholarships while studying in academia.

In 5774 (2013/14), the Association’s activities encompass more than 7,000 students in its programs, in over 100 schools in more than 40 localities. The activities are in cooperation with the Ministry of Education: Northern, Southern, Tel Aviv Districts; the Division for Education and Welfare; the Druze and Bedouin Education Administration; the Amal, Darca, and Amit educational networks; municipal education departments, and philanthropic partners.

“Self-image: All the processes I have described so far change the students’ self-image and their sense of efficacy. The series of successes in the examinations, ending with the matriculation examinations, establishes a new self-image. We work on the students’ self-image in different ways – openly and covertly – it is at the center of our educational work.

“The method includes principles such as defined and agreed upon goal-orientation, a challenging process, measurable results, a limited but flexible time, many opportunities for success, cultural pluralism, legitimacy for being different, etc. The principles are expressed through many teaching and study tools which we have developed.”

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This enormous effort is concentrated into a small population of students in the periphery. Is it possible, and how, to reach all the population of students in the periphery, who your program could help?

“According to estimates, the population of hidden dropouts encompasses around 15% of the students; approximately 65,000 of 9th to 12th graders are hidden dropouts, meaning they are called “students” but don’t function as students. The extent of the effective solutions in existence today is far from enough, and leaves a large population without help or only apparently helped”.

What can be done?

“Firstly, we make a firm policy decision backed up with a budget, that the address is the entire population of students defined as hidden dropouts, with some on the way to actual dropout. In every school, we need to set up a staff of teachers who are expert in teaching this population. These teachers must be trained in a framework specializing in this.

These expert teachers will be awarded special remuneration. The first stage can be a pilot program in 50-100 schools”.

The Yeholot Association, and possibly other organizations, has knowledge of how to do this. The problem is the budget. What you are proposing costs a great deal of money.

“Neglecting this population costs far more than the budget required to help it. We are producing alienated, and sometimes hostile, people, who do not realize their abilities. We undermine the social solidarity and legitimacy of the school as a meritocratic institution which gives its students equal opportunities. It is costing us a lot – on all accounts.

“A basic calculation: the average annual national expenditure on elementary and post-elementary education is NIS 20,000 per child. This means that a failing student who reaches 10th grade costs the State NIS 200,000. 10,000 such students cost the country NIS 200,000,000. And what does the State get in return? Hidden or actual dropouts. Calculations by the Rashi Foundation’s Evaluation Department show that the incremental three-year (10th-12th grades) cost per student in the Start Program is around NIS 20,000. A program graduate repays this sum to the State Treasury by tax payments within 3.6 years. Isn’t it worth it?”

“Regarding the revival of vocational education, the plan is still unknown and, therefore, it is difficult for me to discuss it. At the same time, directing students in the school to tracks which do not lead to certification enabling social mobility through academia is undesirable and holds them back. Vocational education can be of benefit on condition that it doesn’t stand in the way of a matriculation certificate.”

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Your vision is that all students from all classes and ethnic groups will graduate school with a matriculation certificate. But if everyone succeeds in the matriculation examination, the matriculation certificate will lose its value. Success is something relative; if everyone succeeds, no one does.

“We know today that everyone is able to succeed at school, and that it’s the school’s ethical obligation to succeed with everyone and lead all the students to certification which will allow them high-level studies and social mobility. The selection for academia and employment needs to be delayed until after the age of 18, the age at which the responsibility is transferred to the school graduate”.

You are providing most of your students with a matriculation certificate, but perhaps with a heavy price. You are teaching them that the matriculation examinations are a stumbling block, an enemy which must be overcome; maybe, at the same time, you are making your students loathe studying, the striving for knowledge?

“You need to address your criticism to all schools, meaning the Ministry of Education, not to us. We didn’t invent the matriculation examinations. But while your criticism is justified when it’s addressed to the entire education system, it is not justified when addressed to us. As I have already pointed out, we turned the matriculation examinations into a lever for success. During the process of preparing for them, our students not only acquire bodies of knowledge and skills, but also renewed faith in their strengths; they build a positive approach to themselves and society”.

The Minister of Education wishes to carry out two processes which will force you to reorganize: to reduce the number of matriculation examinations, and reinstate vocational education.

“When the Ministry of Education unveils new methods of evaluation – such as research papers – we will know how to prepare ourselves for them. We, as already mentioned, make good use of the matriculation examinations, but we are not fans of them.

“Regarding the revival of vocational education, the plan is still unknown and, therefore, it is difficult for me to discuss it. At the same time, directing students in the school to tracks which do not lead to certification enabling social mobility through academia is undesirable and holds them back. Vocational education can be of benefit on condition that it doesn’t stand in the way of a matriculation certificate”.

You work without stopping (and smoke while doing so). Hasn’t the time come to slow down, to calm down, to take a break and write down your philosophy?

“The entire time I have tried to pass on my approach and method to as many educators as possible, through lectures, workshops, and guidance booklets which I wrote. Today the method is in use with 10,000 students, and has been used with 100,000 students since its inception. Hundreds of teachers and instructors have studied the approach and method and are implementing it. I take short breaks here and there and try to finish my book. One more, relatively long break and the book will be finished. But there is so much work to be done, who has time for a break?”