

**Opinions of Graduates of the Tafnit's Program- "START"
for Matriculation and Dropout-Prevention
Regarding the Program Components and Contribution to
Their Personal and Professional Development**

Abstract

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Summary

One of the main problems faced by Israeli education policymakers today is the growth of socio-economic gaps. This problem is worsened by the twin factors of decentralization and privatization, which increase the trend toward greater social segregation.

Gaps in education are widening every year. Poor achievement at school is closely connected with general socio-economical background and place of residence. In order to minimize these gaps and prevent disadvantaged students from dropping out of school, the Tafnit program was established.

Tafnit's program for Matriculation and dropout-prevention – START – has been implemented in dozens of periphery high schools throughout the country. The Tafnit program was developed by Nissim Cohen, an educational sociologist. Tafnit is a joint program of the Rashi Foundation, the Ministry of Education district departments, Shachar (Social and Educational Services), and the education departments of participating municipalities.

Participants in the program are pupils who have low achievements in the 9th grade; most of these students failed to achieve passing grades, in seven or more subjects, in their 9th grade report card. They typically have an average grade of 51 (43 in core subjects) before their enrollment. Some pupils may be considered as “hidden dropouts” - infrequently attending classes and on the brink of dropping out. If not helped, they are likely to drop out entirely.

Tafnit endeavors to help these students to achieve a record of academic success and to earn higher scores in their Matriculation exams. The ultimate goal is for these students to receive a full Matriculation certificate by the end of 12th grade. This certification will help them get and keep jobs, remain socially integrated, and have a greater chance to access higher education.

The program is operated by school staff, which has been trained to run this program by Tafnit instructors. The premise of the program is that every student, whose I.Q. is within the normal boundaries (who hasn't been diagnosed as intellectually disabled) has the cognitive ability required for attaining success at school.

Indeed, the results show that 60% of those who began studying in the program in the 10th grade obtain a Matriculation certification at the end of 12th grade. Furthermore, 95% of those who started the program in the 10th grade finish 12th grade still enrolled in a high school (Tafnit program for Matriculation certification and dropout prevention – START, January 2010). In addition, more than 95% of those in the program who are obligated to serve in the army are indeed drafted by the IDF (IDF and National Service draft report – Tafnit START report, July 2010).

The current research encompasses the personal stories of 13 Tafnit – START program graduates gathered during in-depth interviews. To develop a full picture of the pupils, a qualitative method was used, which is based on understanding the pupils and their actions. Interpreting the results takes into consideration the pupils' language, world views, processes, attitudes, and expectations. The research sample was chosen in advance to be interviewed by the program team.

Through these personal stories, we learn a lot about what helped the students succeed in Tafnit, their perceptions of the program, and the influence their participation had on various aspects of their lives.

Specifically, the research tried to answer the following questions:

- 1. How do participants in the Tafnit Matriculation certificate and dropout prevention – START program relate their success in high school studies to the learning framework provided by the program?**
- 2. Which other aspects of their stories contribute to their achievements in the last years of high school?**
- 3. Which components of the Tafnit Matriculation certificate and drop-out prevention – START program do the graduates feel had an impact on their success in high school studies?**

4. Which components of the program are perceived by the graduates as contributing to other areas of their lives?

5. What is the overall feeling of the graduates about this program?

For the most part, graduates said that during the years they spent in various educational frameworks before finishing 9th grade, they belonged to the category of young people called "children and youth at risk."

The years of pre-enrollment are remembered by most of those interviewed as **years full of failure, low achievement, and low self-esteem**: many were headed towards leaving school as hidden or actual dropouts. This description demonstrates the huge difference between the feelings of helplessness, frustration, and anger in the years before joining the program and the strong feelings of success, belongingness, and self-worth that developed during the program--and were maintained afterwards.

A recurring motif of the respondents was that they felt like they had been cast off from the educational framework due to their **low achievements and behavioral problems**. By the time they finished the 9th grade, they were in danger of leaving school altogether, making the hidden drop-out apparent. The reasons mentioned by the graduates for not succeeding prior to enrolment in the program are varied: teaching methods which weren't adjusted to the pupils' needs, immigration to Israel, and learning disabilities, are some that are cited. The pupils describe feelings of frustration and despair due to the recurring failures, and this led many to blame themselves, to develop test anxiety, and to give up completely.

It's interesting to note that many graduates divide their life into two periods: one before the Tafnit program and one after. In retrospect, many of the pupils relate to the Tafnit program as a lifesaver, even if they had not been aware of it at the time. One of the respondents recounts that he failed most of his classes before entering the program, yet he finished the 12th grade as an outstanding student, passing his Matriculation exams with honors.

"It's a program that also changed my way of life... Let's say that before... when I came I was quite a problematic child, I didn't care much about school, didn't care much about the future... not only did I become an excellent student, I was an outstanding student among my peers. It was surprising to me, it really saved me..."

Additional reasons that caused their lack of success in school were immigrating to Israel, thus being unfamiliar with the language and culture, and the teaching staff's lack of understanding towards their adaptation difficulties. This caused a continuous decline along with a decrease in learning motivation and self-esteem.

Many graduates describe **parental dysfunction**, which caused family tension and neglect, resulting in scholastic decline, behavioral problems, rebellious acts and drop-out. Others told about chronic diseases, injuries leading to hospitalizations, and even a death of both parents. Sometimes, the students had to support their younger siblings while they needed a significant adult themselves. One of the interviewees spoke of how her father's illness brought a decline since none of the teachers were attentive to her needs. She explained how she was absent from school for weeks and that no one tried to check how she is doing.

"When I was in 8th grade my dad had a heart attack... I didn't know how to deal with that... When he was at the hospital, I would tell my mother that I won't go to school, because I won't be able to concentrate even if I go. So I really didn't go for a week, 2 weeks, and no one calls, no one asks, no one is interested, no... after two weeks...I came to school, math was especially difficult for me... If I tried to integrate, she would tell me: 'You haven't been here for two weeks, why would you try all of a sudden...' it's like they were against me. They didn't understand me. That made me disconnect even more. I said, I don't know the material anyway, I am not doing well anyway and the teacher is always against me. All the other kids were laughing at me for not knowing the material".

This was the background for their enrolment into the Tafnit program and the emotional charge they brought to class. Needless to say, their faith in themselves and in their abilities was very low.

Ways to join the program – Before going to high school, when the graduates were asked to join Tafnit, about which they knew very little, they had many fears. They remember well the first conversation that opened a new door for them. Then they didn't believe in themselves in light of past failures and didn't imagine they would be able to pass the upcoming Matriculation exams. They already felt, in that first conversation, that this time no one is giving up on them. Whether it was their mother, a teacher or the principal that didn't give up, it was enough, to make them feel that they are not being given up on, and to make them join despite the fears and uncertainties. The "not giving up on me" motif was a motivation stimulator which accompanied the graduates during their 3 years in high school after joining the program, until eventually they internalize it and stopped giving up on themselves.

The Main Findings

The main finding indicates that program graduates are very satisfied with their experience in the program and they appreciate its significance and contribution to them. The combination of the program's different components enabled their personal and scholastic success. Giving up one of the components would damage, in their view, the wholeness of the program and its ability to lead pupils to success.

The main program aspects as raised by the graduates:

1. Empowering the pupils via the program through emotional relationships with a "significant other" – the most outstanding aspect that was brought up is relation to the feeling of empowerment that they experienced was through the **attitude of the teachers and teaching assistants** towards them during the years they took part in the program. Their emotional bond with a "significant adult" figure who accompanied them during their education, and encouraged them to continue their journey towards success, had a great impact, in their view, on their professional and personal empowerment. They claim that this person was very attentive to them, supported and encouraged them until they reached the finishing line that they were striving for. They have observed that, many times, this person replaced a significant parental figure that had been missing in their lives.

This kind of attachment eventually led to internal motivation and an ability to attain very challenging achievements which make the interviewees feel literally amazed that they were able to do so, as one of them said:

"I got 87, 88 in the exams and then she looked at me and I smiled, half embarrassed: "You see, you can do it!" I lowered my head and couldn't do anything but hug her - she was like a mother or a sister to me".

From a more mature point of view, the interviewees are now capable of relating the great amount of work they put in while studying to their results, something they were unaware of in the past. Some years after leaving school, they now understand the real worth of the enrolment certificate they gained.

2. Experiencing success and high achievements – Once they join the program, the pupils start to experience success. Most of them cannot recall a time when they received marks above 90; getting good grades is very exciting for them. Even if they are aware that the good grades might be part of the program's efforts to motivate them, the awareness has no influence on their sense of pride that overcomes them when their mother hangs their tests on the refrigerator.

The graduates describe how they took tests as many times as needed, learning from their mistakes with their teachers' assistance, and finally, finally succeeding. Without encouragement, support, and various methods adapted to their needs, they would have easily given up on receiving their Matriculation certificate.

Apart from their high marks, the graduates received encouragement for their efforts: letters from the staff as well as prizes and trophies. Some students said this was the first time they had ever received recognition and positive feedback.

It seems that the changes were not reflected only in the Matriculation certificate. The students started to relate effort to results and saw that by channeling their energies into achievements, the meetings with teachers were different and the people around them approved of them. Most can't believe it:

"I couldn't believe it. Suddenly I get a 100 on a Math test. I said 'how can it be? It's not mine!' And then as all my marks got better, they were starting to say good things about me in school meetings. They were saying things about me that weren't said before... things that couldn't have happened before... and thank God, after 12th grade, I got a full Matriculation certificate with Math and English at high levels."

Today, many of the graduates say that their feelings about their abilities have been internalized; the graduates believe in their ability to attain achievements through their efforts. They are not afraid of working hard in order to improve their exams results in order to apply to colleges and universities. Just as their teachers didn't give up on them, they don't give up on themselves.

3. Social Integration and a supportive learning environment in the peer group – When they join the new group, the pupils are faced with many social changes. Sometimes the transition is radical since these are new classmates, pupils they did not know prior to 10th grade. With time, a social integration and closeness develops, eventually growing into friendship as mutual help and cooperation is expressed. Gradually, new friendships replace former ones that aren't suitable anymore. Many times, the pupils spoke about benefits arising from creating a new peer group:

"I used to hang out with problematic people because that's what was around me. Suddenly I met nicer people than the type I had known, and I connected with them. We bonded and now we hang out almost every day."

4. Structural and pedagogic components – The empowerment process happens due to the program's structure, which enables the acquisition of new study skills. The significant component in this area is the **small class size** with high teacher/pupil ratio. A teacher and two teaching assistants allows for personal attention to be given to each pupil. Empowerment and encouragement is given to the pupils, and the phrase "anybody can" is conveyed --and epitomized -- in Tafnit classrooms.

Another significant component in the success of the program is the **scholastic marathons**. Two or three days before a Matriculation exam, the pupils go to a hotel near their home and study intensively from sunrise till late at night. The graduates reported how important these marathons were to their success in the Matriculation exams, stressing the benefit of the combination of the supportive atmosphere with a strong social influence.

In addition, the graduates noted **the varied learning methods**, the **frequent tests** in which they received high marks, and the **extra afterschool study hours** as factors in their success. Creating Individual work plans for every pupil was utilized in the program, and these proved quite valuable: goals were set, targets created, and no one could fall off track:

"And suddenly you get a 100 and say, 'Wow! I got a 100 for the first time in 4 years,' it's like; 'I can do it!' And then on the next test another 100, and then again a 100, a 90 and so on, until gradually, you start to believe in yourself. And really, in the marathons they used to give us tests and more tests until we got good at taking them and lost any fears we had...it sounds basic but it's a process—and at least for me, it worked."

Change of Self Image

The pupils' stories reflect the contribution of the program to their adult lives, something that was expressed through a general feeling about their abilities and high self esteem. The quote below echoes this feeling:

"It's not only marks, the experience makes you persist, makes you want to strive for something, to believe you can. They tell us it doesn't matter what other people say. In the past, everyone said 'you're not going to make it, you can't get a Matriculation certificate,' but look! I can do it!"

The change is mirrored mainly in the self-image and the **positive feedback from people around them**. One pupil described the value his parents placed in his success:

"When I got my Matriculation certificate, when they saw my marks were really good, my dad cried. He's very sensitive. And when the teachers invited him to talk, he said that before the program, he felt like he was losing me, that something was slipping between his hands. He knew I was smart, and he always believed in me. When the program ended and I saw I had a Matriculation certificate, I told myself 'Wow, you did it!' My father was so proud. At the ceremony he cried and said he got me back."

Socially, the impact is great as well. Their peers, who once did not think highly of them, now changed their opinions and even view them as a role model. This positive attitude and self-esteem translates into a willingness to contribute to society, to seek a leading role in the army, and to believe in one's personal ability to continue to higher education and self-fulfillment, a thing most program graduates had never thought possible.

Change of Perception Regarding Higher Education

Graduates report that before they joined the program the academia looked like an unreachable utopia. Since the dream seemed to be so unattainable, they preferred not to think about it at all. Most of them only found the will to go on to higher education after they understood the dream could be attained due to their success in the admission exams and their high self-esteem and belief in their own ability, which was acquired through the program. As these barriers were removed, their chances of going on to higher education increased.

In addition, since they had acquired learning strategies, the graduates suggest that they will not find it difficult to do well in university and they express a great deal of self-confidence in their learning ability:

Q: *Is it something you always had in mind? That you'd like to continue, to go on to university?*

A: *No, because I told myself "I can't do it. I won't pass the exams, I won't go to university. It was too difficult a challenge for me. So now I say "there you go, you did it, I have an admission certificate. So if I managed to do all of that, why couldn't I do well there? ... I have the tools, I know the learning methods; I know how to sit and learn, more or less. Why won't it work there? So this is more or less the worldview directed by the program".*

The urge to continue studying is so strong, that some of the graduates wish to continue their studies right after military service and are already studying for the psychometric exam. Maybe because they wish to continue and experience positive feelings regarding their educational success like they had in high school.

Although generally most of the graduates were very satisfied with the program's contribution, **the main difficulties** they mentioned concerned the learning workload during the three-year program. **Many learning hours**, especially marathon days before the Matriculation exams, created a great deal of stress which was reflected, among other things, in the difficulty to take the preliminary test late in the evening.

Another difficulty voiced by the graduates was the **problem of discipline** in the learning groups, which wasted a considerable amount of time. Therefore, some graduates offered to carefully consider the admission requirements, while others claimed no pupil should be left out, even when they had difficult behavioural problems. Most interviewees noted that the change required is to extend the program and open additional classes to help more benefit from it.

Practical Recommendations

The main conclusion is that the Tafnit admission certificate and the START drop-out prevention program is, on the whole, proving successful in the Matriculation exams and having a positive impact on its graduates' futures. Therefore, the recommendations will mainly focus on extending the program and cooperating and introducing additional factors which can also contribute:

Here are a few practical recommendations for the program's management, stemming from the current research:

- In order to reduce the pupils' workload, the program should be extended and begin in junior high, by the end of 8th grade instead of by the end of the 9th grade. This way studying for the Matriculation exams will be spread over four years instead of three. This recommendation has another advantage: reducing the damage of self-esteem due to recurring failings at an early stage of the young pupil's life.

- Extending the program to other populations should be considered and, if possible, the program should be implemented in more schools in the periphery areas because, as one of the graduates noted:

"More classes like this should be opened. Enrolling more pupils who need it, who can't do it alone".

- As it was found that the contribution of the long days of studying outside school are significant to pupils' success, it might be worthwhile considering how it may be possible to add concentrated days of this kind. Many of the graduates noted that the marathons helped them do well in the exams but also that it was difficult to take the preliminary exam at the end of a long day of studying. Therefore, it is recommended to see whether taking the preliminary exam the morning after would be more effective.

- It is advisable to carefully consider the suitability of the pupils who join the program. On the one hand, there is no doubt that it would be a safety net for pupils who will not be able to succeed any other way and the very fact that they felt they are not being left out drove them to learn. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that discipline problems waste too much time and resources, and might jeopardize the learning process for the other pupils.

- As one of the desirable aims is accessibility to higher education, it is recommended to consider providing help for pupils with limited knowledge of academic institutions. Extending the program, to help its' graduates during their military service, by improving the admission exams marks and making use of psychometric exams in preparatory institutions, should also be considered. Contacting academic institutions will help shape these ideas and give rise to others.