

Hannah's Nursery: Educational-Community Integration as a Tool for Strengthening Social Values, Equality, and Community Resilience

Introduction

Since the events of October 7th, Israeli society has been grappling with a deep crisis that has exacerbated existing social and political divides. In times of crisis, a society's moral values are put to the test, and its resilience is often measured by its treatment of its most vulnerable populations. One of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in Israel is the population of undocumented refugees, particularly children, who experience the crisis's impact more intensely due to a lack of basic resources and emergency response tools.

For these children, educational-community frameworks—especially those based on integration—serve as a crucial anchor, providing both immediate support and a space that fosters a sense of belonging, security, and development. Such frameworks reflect society's commitment to justice and human dignity, strengthen social resilience, and enable crisis response through solidarity and humanity.

Investing in educational-community frameworks for refugee children is not just a humanitarian act but also a long-term strategy that benefits society as a whole. It lays the foundation for a shared existence based on empathy and mutual respect, strengthening Israeli society's resilience in the face of future challenges.

Background

Integrating diverse communities into a dynamic social fabric is a central goal of any society, requiring social, cultural, and economic processes that promote inclusion. This process allows individuals from minority backgrounds to acquire social and cultural tools for successful integration—especially children, for whom inclusion is critical during key developmental stages. Research shows that educational integration positively impacts children's linguistic and social development, reduces social disparities, and fosters tolerance and acceptance.

With this understanding, Unitaf established *Hannah's Nursery* in 2023—Tel Aviv's first educational-community integrative framework that brings together Israeli children and

Eritrean refugee children, promoting values of multiculturalism, equality, and mutual respect.

Characteristics of Hannah's Nursery

The program operates based on four key principles:

1. A multicultural staff comprising both Israeli and Eritrean caregivers.
2. A tailored child-to-staff ratio to ensure individualized attention.
3. Encouragement of community involvement and strengthening family connections.
4. A strategically located facility in a mixed residential neighborhood, symbolizing the potential for inter-community collaboration.

Designed for toddlers aged one to three, the program provides high-quality educational and emotional support, focusing on personalized care and community development. It also offers professional training for staff in trauma, developmental education, and multiculturalism.

Research Rationale

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of integrative educational frameworks, few studies have examined the implementation and challenges of integration in settings that include children from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. While educational integration is the norm in many Western countries, Israel's education system is becoming increasingly segregated.

This study focused on *Hannah's Nursery* as a unique case study to examine the intersection between integrative values and their practical implementation, addressing power dynamics, accessibility, and resource allocation. The research aimed to achieve two main objectives:

1. To explore the perceptions and expectations of parents, educators, mentors, and administrators regarding the nursery's operation and the application of the integrative-community model.

2. To bridge the theoretical and empirical gap by investigating the framework's contribution to its stakeholders' diverse needs and fostering an inclusive and connecting discourse.

Using a constructivist approach, the study employed thematic content analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with all involved parties. The findings identified three key themes:

1. The tension between ideological vision and practical implementation.
2. The transition from representation to cultural mediation.
3. The boundaries of integration.

These themes highlight the potential of integrative frameworks to promote equality, inclusion, and cultural recognition while also pointing to the need for ongoing efforts to overcome social and economic barriers.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research approach, allowing an exploration of how individuals perceive and interpret reality within specific social and cultural contexts (Shkedi, 2003). The research sample consisted of 14 participants from all levels of engagement with *Hannah's Nursery* (7 parents, 4 educational and mentoring staff members, and 3 members of Unitaf's management team). The sample size aligns with standard qualitative research practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), aiming to reach empirical saturation.

Participants were recruited through targeted invitations for professional staff and an open call for parents. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews (Patton, 1999), a key qualitative research tool that provides a flexible framework for understanding experiences and their social and cultural contexts (Shkedi, 2003). Data analysis followed the thematic content analysis method developed by Braun & Clarke (2013), enabling a detailed and nuanced presentation of findings.

Findings

The research findings incorporate insights from all stakeholders involved in *Hannah's Nursery*, which serves as Unitaf's integrative-community model for educational settings. Three main narratives emerged, forming three key themes:

1. The Intersection of Ideology and Practical Implementation

The vision of integrating refugee and Israeli children within *Hannah's Nursery* illuminated the tension between ideology and the complex educational reality. While the integration model was founded on principles of equality, inclusion, and breaking social barriers, its implementation required navigating moral, logistical, and social dilemmas. Unitaf's professionals had to reassess their priorities and undergo a complex process of planning and adaptation.

By the end of the first year, a major challenge was balancing the ideological goal with maintaining a high-quality and stable framework. The sense of community that developed around the program reflected the gradual success of the process, with many viewing integration as an added value to the framework rather than a stand-alone goal. The nursery demonstrated that integrative education is not just an aspirational ideal but an achievable reality, provided there is a commitment to building a supportive system that prioritizes the child's well-being.

2. The Boundaries of Integration: Power Gaps and Community Involvement

The founding vision of *Hannah's Nursery* aimed to bridge educational and cultural disparities in early childhood education, offering an integrative alternative in Tel Aviv's Shapira neighborhood. The goal was to create a shared educational space that welcomed all neighborhood children. However, in daily practice, disparities in perceptions, resource accessibility, and sense of belonging among parents highlighted cultural, social, and economic differences.

Although inter-community connections developed gradually, challenges persisted, particularly regarding community power structures and varying levels of parental

involvement. The research findings reveal a complex web of inter-community relationships influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors.

3. From Representation to Meaningful Integration: Bridging Gaps in Early Childhood Education

The integration process between Israeli and Eritrean refugee communities in early childhood education proved to be a multifaceted journey beyond merely placing two communities under one roof. The findings suggest a gradual transition from technical coexistence to deeper connections, addressing structural and cultural challenges along the way.

While the existence of an integrative framework facilitated meaningful interactions, it also exposed the complexities of existing power dynamics. True integration requires a multidimensional approach, combining pedagogical, emotional, and social elements to create opportunities for significant inter-community engagement. The study emphasizes that genuine integration is not just about physical proximity but about fostering emotional and social connections in a safe space that allows mutual cultural recognition and appreciation.

Implications and Future Research Directions

The study highlights the significant potential of integrative-community educational frameworks in fostering social equality, strengthening belonging, and building community resilience. However, it also reveals the complexities of implementing such an ideological vision, particularly given the social, economic, and cultural disparities between communities.

Sustaining these frameworks requires continuous support, both pedagogically and emotionally, alongside sensitive mediation to bridge power gaps and enhance trust and engagement among all stakeholders. A key implication of the research is the need to deepen relationships among children, parents, and staff, with a focus on developing social and emotional skills beyond educational content. This study lays the groundwork for developing additional integrative frameworks in Israel and beyond, aiming to reduce the negative effects of educational segregation and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.