TAUB CENTER
for Social Policy Studies in Israel

The Preschool Special Education Expansion Problem: Numbers, Trends, and Disparities

Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass

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Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel

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The Preschool Special Education Expansion Problem: Numbers, Trends, and Disparities

Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass

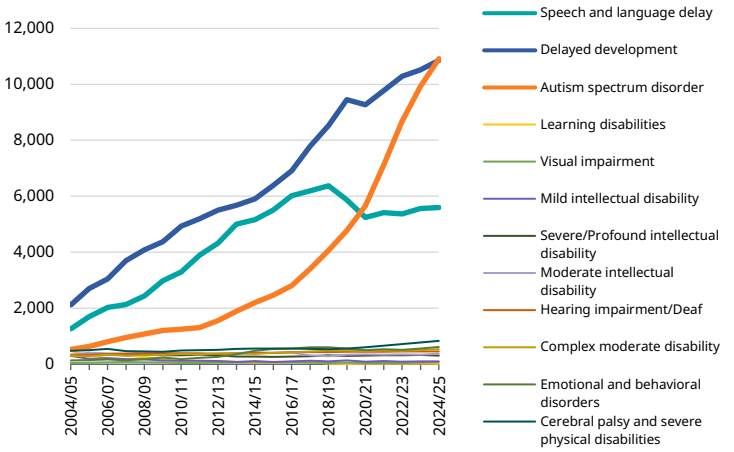
Introduction

Early intervention during preschool years represents a critical window of opportunity that can fundamentally alter the life trajectory of children with special needs (Bakken et al., 2017). Research shows that targeted support during these formative years addresses immediate developmental challenges and substantially reduces the need for later intensive interventions (Heckman, 2006). Growing enrollment and resource constraints in special education systems worldwide make understanding preschool special education placement patterns increasingly urgent (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

As illustrated in Figure 1, which displays enrollment in separate special education preschools in Israel by disability (not including children in inclusion settings), patterns have changed dramatically over the past two decades.

* Dr. Sarit Silverman, Senior Researcher, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel. Nachum Blass, Principal Researcher and Chair, Taub Center Education Policy Program. This publication was possible through the generous support of the Beracha Foundation, the van Leer Foundation, Yad Hanadiv, and the Shashua Family Foundation.

Figure 1. Number of special education students in separate special education classrooms, by year and class type



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Three disability categories account for the substantial rise in special education placement during this period. Developmental delays have consistently represented the largest category, showing steady growth from 2,000 children in 2004/05 to almost 11,000 by 2024/25. However, the most striking change has occurred in autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which has experienced explosive growth — from 500 children in 2004/05 to almost 11,000 by 2024/25, remarkably reaching parity with developmental delays. Delayed language represents the third largest category, showing substantial growth from about 1,200 children in 2004/05 to peak at 6,000 in 2017/18, followed by a slight decline through 2024/25. Collectively, these three categories account for the vast majority of the overall increase in separate special education preschool enrollment. Other disability categories have maintained relatively low and stable enrollment levels throughout this period, reflecting the expected consistency of conditions that are primarily rooted in biological or congenital factors.

Our previous research on sociodemographic patterns in special education preschool enrollment revealed important disparities (Silverman & Blank, 2023). While the distribution of children in special education preschools by local socioeconomic status (SES) was fairly similar to that of general preschools,

there were significant differences when examining educational streams. Children in the Hebrew State stream were substantially overrepresented in special education preschools, while other streams (with the exception of Druze) were underrepresented. This suggests that factors beyond disability prevalence may be influencing special education placement, including potential differences in access to evaluations, cultural attitudes, and structural barriers to service utilization across educational streams.

These preschool-specific findings align with broader international trends in special education services that have expanded significantly across high-income countries in recent decades. In the United States, the number of students aged 3–21 receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grew from 6.4 million in 2012/13 to 7.5 million in 2022/23, increasing from 13% to 15% of total public-school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). A similar trend has been observed across Europe: The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) reports that, despite variations in identification rates, the proportion of students receiving specialized educational support services has grown in recent years (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024).

Israel has experienced a particularly pronounced expansion in special education enrollment, attracting significant public and policy attention. The number of students receiving special education services grew from 112,000 in 2002/03 to 293,000 in 2022/23, increasing from 6.7% to 11.7% of the total student body (Weisblei, 2023). Previous research by the Taub Center has highlighted this sharp rise, attributing it to a combination of legislative changes, shifts in diagnostic criteria, and growing parental awareness (Blass, 2022a; Blass, 2022b).

A significant legislative change came in 2018 with an amendment to Israel's Special Education Law. This amendment introduced reforms aimed at addressing the needs of students with special needs more effectively. Among its primary objectives were promoting the integration of students with special needs into general classrooms wherever possible and enhancing parental autonomy by allowing parents to choose between general and special education frameworks for their children. Additionally, the amendment redefined the range of support services for students with disabilities learning in general classrooms, distinguishing between individualized support (סל אישי) which earmarks resources for individual students based on their needs and cannot be shared with other students, and institutional support (סל מוסדי),

which is allocated according to a statistical formula to all schools, and is supposed to enable them to support students with special needs.

The growth in special education has had profound implications for the education budget, as the per-student budget for special education is considerably higher than for general education (Blass, 2022b; Weissblei, 2023). Consequently, special education funding in Israel has grown at a much faster rate than the overall education budget. The financial implications of this growth raise important questions about resource allocation and effectiveness, creating a need for more granular analysis of special education trends to inform policy decisions.

Previous research has primarily focused on broad system-wide trends, leaving a gap in our understanding of the specific factors driving the significant increases in special education enrollment (Weissblei, 2023). This paper, the first in a series analyzing trends in special education by educational stage, seeks to examine these developments in greater detail. Given the critical importance of early intervention during preschool years, understanding specific patterns of special education enrollment is essential for optimizing both educational outcomes and resource allocation. In this study, we analyze trends in Israel's preschool special education system from the 2020/21 school year through the 2023/24 school year, examining support type, educational stream, local SES, and disability frequency to identify patterns among special education preschool students.

Data sources and definitions of key terminology

Data on the special education system for the current study were provided by the Ministry of Education's Special Education Division.[1] Data on the overall preschool population were obtained from the Ministry of Education's Wide Perspective database. This paper analyzes trends by the following variables:[2]

1 The authors wish to thank Yoel Levin and Elinor Ben-Levy from the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education.

2 Given our distinction between support type, educational stream, local SES level, and disability, we do not distinguish between educational stages. Future studies on special education in primary and secondary education will incorporate grade-level data.

Support type

During preschool, special education students either attend separate special education preschools or are integrated into general classrooms. Integrated students receive either institutional or individualized support. The key distinction between these support types lies in how they are allocated. Institutional support is provided to preschools according to a standard formula based on class size and is typically intended for students with milder disabilities and higher functioning levels.[3] In contrast, individualized support is designated for individual students and tailored to address the specific needs of students with more significant challenges. The analysis compares special education trends by these three support types: separate special education preschool, institutional support, and individualized support.

Educational stream

The variable was constructed by combining school supervision authority (פיקוח: ממלכתי, חרדי, ממלכתי דתי) and population group, referred to as "sector" in Hebrew (מגזר: יהודי, ערבי, בדואי, דרוזי). These two variables were used to define six distinct educational streams within the Israeli education system: Hebrew State, State-religious, Haredi, Arab, Bedouin, and Druze. This construction assumes that, in general, most students attend educational streams that reflect their family's identity. However, there are exceptions to this trend, which may be more prevalent in preschool than in other educational stages, and in special education than in general education. For the purpose of this paper, we will use the term "educational stream" to refer to these categories.

Local SES

Eshkol is a local SES indicator that categorizes communities into 10 hierarchical levels, with level 1 representing the lowest and level 10 the highest, based on key factors including income, education, and employment. For this analysis, these 10 levels were grouped into five broader categories — 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, and 9–10 — to ensure meaningful differences are captured while avoiding an overly granular analysis. Note that only 4% of preschool students reside in the highest SES bracket (9–10), so although we present data for them, trends are not always as visible.

3 See Ministry of Education letter regarding Integration Basket for Preschool Children, July 2022 and the Ministry of Education Director General's memorandum from July 2022.

Disability

Each special education student is classified according to their most significant disability, which can determine the type of support and interventions provided. The Ministry of Education has a list of some 20 disabilities for special education students.

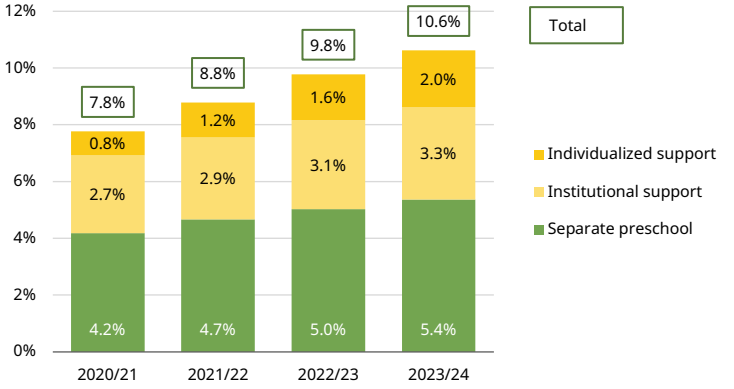
Special education preschool trends by support type

Appendix Table 1 displays the number of special education preschoolers by support type, while Figure 2 shows their share within the overall preschool population. Together, they highlight key trends in special education enrollment and its dynamics relative to the broader preschool system. Over the four school years from 2020/21 to 2023/24, special education preschool enrollment rose by 36%, from 42,000 to 57,000, while general education preschool enrollment declined by 3%, from 496,000 to 481,000. As shown in Figure 2, this increase in special education enrollment corresponds with a rise in the share of special education preschoolers within the total preschool population, from 8% to 11%. These trends highlight shifting preschool dynamics and emphasize special education's growing prominence.

Growth occurred across all support types, though the trends varied markedly. Separate special education preschools continue to serve the majority of special education preschool students, but their share decreased from 54% to 51% over this period (calculated based on data in Appendix Table 1). Despite this shift, the total number of students enrolled in special education preschools increased by 28%. As shown in Figure 2, the share of students in separate special education settings grew from 4.2% of the overall preschool population in 2020/21, to 5.4% by 2023/24.

The most notable growth occurred within inclusion, where enrollment surged by 47%, from 19,000 to 28,000 students. Within inclusion settings, institutional support grew by a more modest 19%, slower than the growth in separate special education preschools. In contrast, individualized support experienced remarkable growth, more than doubling from 0.8% of the preschool population in 2020/21 to 2% in 2023/24, with enrollment rising from 4,500 to 10,700 students.

Figure 2. Percentage of special education preschoolers within the overall preschool population by support type, 2020/21–2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Trends by educational stream

Examining special education preschool enrollment by educational stream is crucial for assessing inequality within the education system and identifying underserved groups. Appendix Table 2 displays the number of special education students by educational stream, and school year. Figure 3 presents a series of figures to provide context to these numbers and examines the share of special education students within each stream, and then examines participation in the different special education support types within and between educational streams.

Over the four years, the number of special education preschoolers increased across all educational streams, as seen in both Appendix Table 2 and Figure 3a. However, the extent of this growth varied between streams. For instance, while students in the Bedouin system account for a smaller proportion of the overall student population, there was a notable increase of 62% in special education enrollment, rising from 1,142 students in 2020/21 to 1,848 in 2023/24. In contrast, students in Haredi preschools, who represent a larger share of the student population, saw the lowest percentage increase, with a growth of 27%, from 10,704 in 2020/21 to 13,597 in 2023/24. The remaining educational streams exhibited growth rates closer to the overall average of 37%, ranging from 32% to 43%.

Figure 3a displays the proportion of special education students within each educational stream by school year. The proportion is greatest, and has seen the most significant growth, in the Hebrew State system. This pronounced increase can be attributed to two concurrent demographic trends: not only a rise in special education enrollment but also a notable decrease in the overall preschool population within this stream. While the Hebrew State preschool population declined from approximately 207,000 students in 2020/21 to 189,000 in 2023/24 (a 9% decrease), the other educational streams generally experienced population growth during this same period. The exception is the Druze stream, which saw a marginal 2% decrease in overall enrollment.

This demographic context explains the Hebrew State system's relative increase: total enrollment shrinks while special education enrollment grows. This dual effect amplifies the growth rate in the proportion of special education students in the Hebrew State stream when compared to other streams and is unique to this stream. In all other educational streams where growth in special education enrollment has occurred, overall student populations have been stable or increasing.

Figures 3b and 3c illustrate that, despite the overall increase in special education enrollment across all educational streams, there are notable differences between educational streams in their distribution across special education support types. Figure 3b depicts the proportion of support types within special education students in each educational stream for the 2023/24 school year.[4] There is a disproportionate share of students in separate special education preschools in the Hebrew State stream: 60% of special education students who attend Hebrew State institutions are enrolled in separate preschools, compared to the national average of 51%. In contrast, other educational streams fall below this average. Students in the Bedouin, State-religious, and Haredi systems, show higher reliance on institutional support, with approximately 40% of their special education students receiving this type of assistance, compared to the 21–31% observed among the remaining streams. Notably, among special education students in the State-religious and Bedouin systems, institutional support constitutes the largest proportion, deviating from the overall trend where separate preschools constitute the majority.

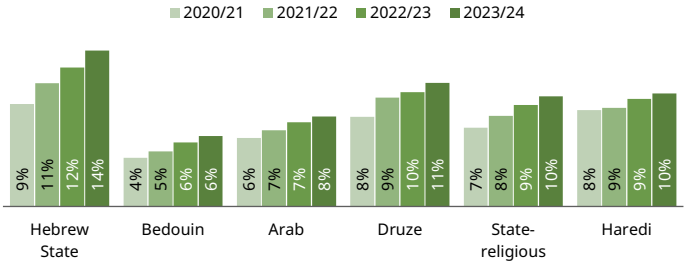
4 The trends in support type by educational stream over the four years generally align with the overall patterns noted in the previous section, showing growth in individualized support and a decline in separate preschools.

Figure 3c examines the relative proportion of educational streams within each support type compared to their distribution in the general preschool system for the 2023/24 school year. Assuming disability rates are equivalent across educational streams, these proportions should align with their composition among general preschool students, as seen with students in Druze preschools in which there is roughly equal representation across support types. However, disparities are evident in other streams. Students in Hebrew State preschools are disproportionately overrepresented in separate special education preschools, comprising 53% of these students compared to 34% among general preschool students. Students in the Arab and Bedouin systems are underrepresented across all support types, with their respective bars falling below the reference line for general preschoolers. Students in Haredi and State-religious preschools show greater reliance on institutional support.

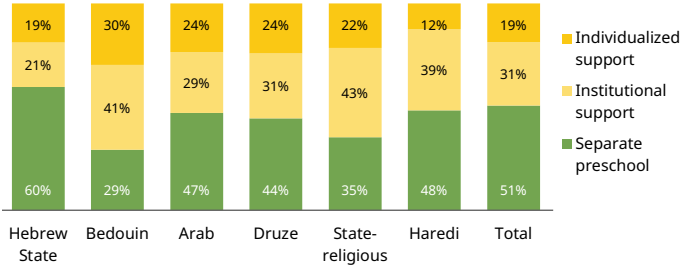
These patterns suggest uneven usage of special education services by educational stream. The disparities likely stem from complex factors including geographical constraints, limited special education preschool options in some communities, varying levels of awareness about developmental support, underlying population dynamics, and variation in the stigmatization of special education. The unexpected variations in institutional support are of particular concern since it should theoretically be at least broadly consistent across systems. The magnitude of the variation potentially indicates deeper systemic challenges in special education placement and resource allocation.

Figure 3. Special education preschool trends by educational stream

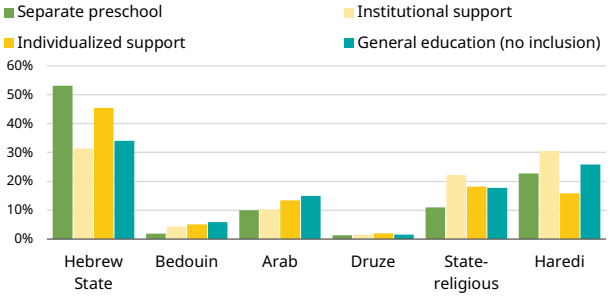
a. The relative share and growth of special education preschool students, by educational stream



b. Relative proportion of special education preschool support types, by educational stream, 2023/24



c. Share of special education type compared to general education, by educational stream, 2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Trends by local SES

This section parallels the previous one by examining trends and access to preschool special education services by local SES. While there is overlap between educational stream and local SES — with a higher concentration of low SES among Haredi, Bedouin, and Arab students — it is important to analyze these dimensions separately before considering both factors together. Appendix Table 3 displays the number of special education students by SES category, and Figure 4 presents the share of special education students by SES category and participation in the different special education support types within and between SES categories. While all SES categories saw increases in special education participation, growth was lowest in the 1–2 category, at 30%, compared to 34%–36% in the remaining SES categories, displayed in Appendix Table 3.

Figure 4a displays the share of special education students within each SES category. The data reveal a distinctive inverted U-shaped pattern in special education enrollment by SES with rates peaking in the middle 5–6 category, and relatively lower in the higher and lower SES categories. The notable increase in the 7–8 category, which rose from 7% to 11%, is likely attributable to the overlap with the Hebrew State stream. This is similar to the trend observed in the Hebrew State stream analysis, referenced above: the total number of students in these SES areas has decreased, which amplifies the share of special education students.

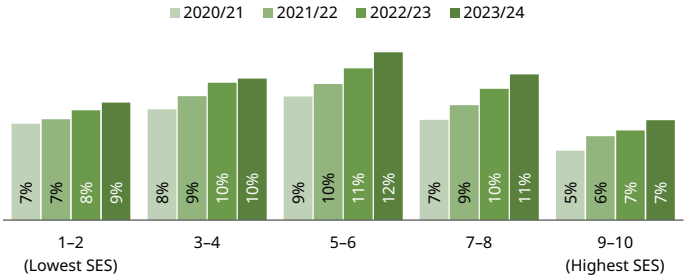
Figure 4b displays the distribution of special education support types by SES for the 2023/24 school year. Consistent with the main trends, around 50% of special education students attend separate preschools in all SES categories, except for 3–4, where it is the lowest at 44%. Institutional support accounts for a substantial share of low SES special education preschoolers (1–4) at 35%, gradually decreasing, reaching its lowest levels at 24–25% in the highest SES groups (7–10). In contrast, individualized support steadily increases with SES, from 14% in the lowest category to 28% in the highest. These opposing trends — decreasing rates of institutional support as SES rises, alongside increasing rates of individualized support — may point to differing approaches to assessment and support. In lower SES areas, assessments may lead to a preference for separate preschool placements over integration with individualized support, while in higher SES areas, there is a stronger tendency toward individualized

support. Or it could signal a classic "Matthew Effect" in which those from more advantaged backgrounds are better positioned to access support services, potentially allowing them to secure more individualized support options for their children (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018).

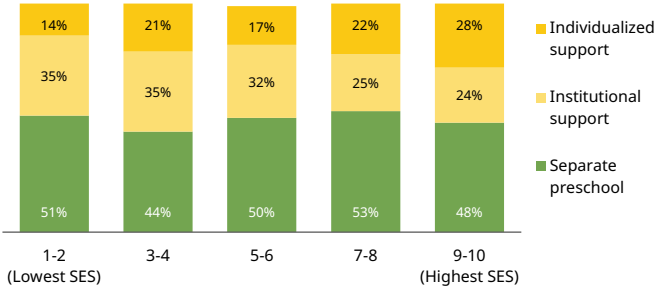
Figure 4c compares the relative proportion of local SES categories within each special education support type compared to general preschool students for the 2023/24 school year. In the lowest SES category (1–2), all special education support types are underrepresented compared to general preschool. This underrepresentation may indicate barriers to access, including limited resources for developmental assessments, fewer specialists in low-SES areas, or structural barriers to obtaining necessary evaluations and referrals for special education services. In contrast, for SES levels 3 through 8, most special education support types are overrepresented, suggesting a higher concentration of special education services in these mid- to high-SES areas. Examining trends by support type reveals distinct patterns: Special education preschools are overrepresented in the middle SES categories (5–8) and underrepresented in the lower ones (1–4). Individualized support is overrepresented in SES levels 3–8, with underrepresentation in the lowest category (1–2). Institutional support is less utilized in the 7–8 category but is overrepresented in SES levels 3–6.

Figure 4. Special education preschool trends by local SES

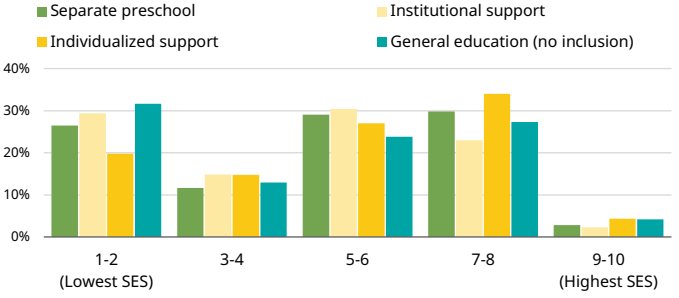
a. The relative share and growth of special education preschool students, by local SES



b. Relative proportion of special education preschool support types, by local SES, 2023/24



c. Share of special education type compared to general education, by local SES, 2023/24

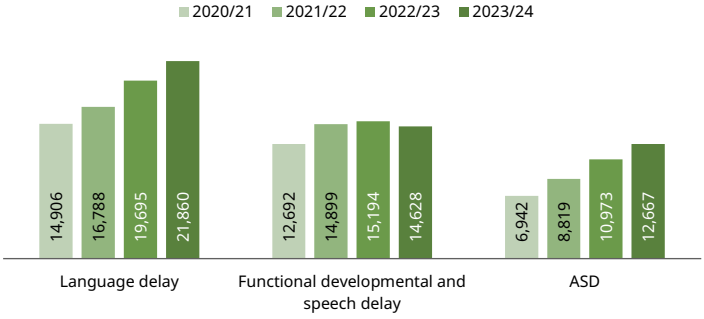


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Disability prevalence and trends of support types, educational streams, and local SES by disability category

To gain deeper insight into the characteristics of the special education preschool population, we examined the frequency of different types of student disabilities. The Ministry of Education dataset classifies special education students according to their primary diagnosis from a list of some 20 disabilities. Appendix Table 3 presents the frequency of the top five disabilities in each school year, which cumulatively account for approximately 90% of all special education preschool students. Reinforcing what was shown in Figure 1, every year, the three most common disabilities were developmental language delay, developmental delay in functioning and language, and ASD. Together, these account for 83–86% of all special education preschool students, as presented in Figure 5. Not only were these three disabilities the most prevalent across all four years, but their student numbers also increased profoundly, with ASD demonstrating the most remarkable growth, increasing from 6,942 to 12,667 students. That is an 80% increase over a mere three-year period.

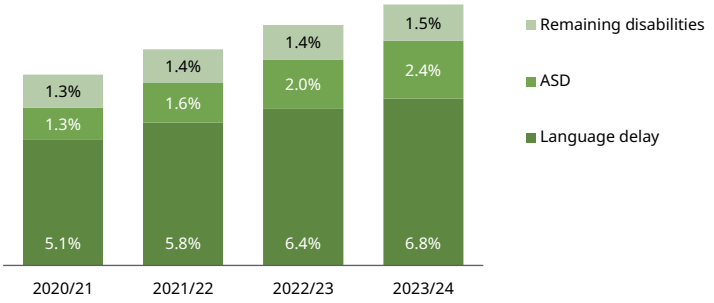
Figure 5. Growth in special education students across most prevalent disability categories



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

The remaining analyses focus on three main groups of disabilities: delayed language (combining developmentally delayed language and developmentally delayed functioning and language), ASD, and remaining disabilities (encompassing all other categories). Figure 6 presents the prevalence of the disability categories in the overall preschool population across the four school years included in the data. Delayed language has the highest prevalence in the preschool population, with a modest rise from 5.1% in 2020/21 to 6.8% in 2023/24. In contrast, ASD showed a more dramatic trajectory in relative terms, rising from 1.3% to 2.4% — an 85% increase despite representing a smaller proportion of the student population. The remaining disabilities category saw a marginal rise, increasing from 1.3% to 1.5%.

Figure 6. Prevalence of disability categories in the preschool population, 2020/21–2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

The increasing prevalence of delayed language and ASD among preschoolers is concerning but not entirely unexpected. These disabilities primarily affect language and communication. A previous Taub Center study using Tipat Halav data found an increase in Israeli infants and toddlers failing to meet language milestones between 2016 and 2022 (Akiva et al., 2024). Although delayed milestone achievement does not directly equate to a diagnosis, it significantly raises the likelihood of subsequent developmental delays or disabilities. The population in the Tipat Halav study likely overlaps with the current preschool population, as both represent the same young Israeli birth cohorts during

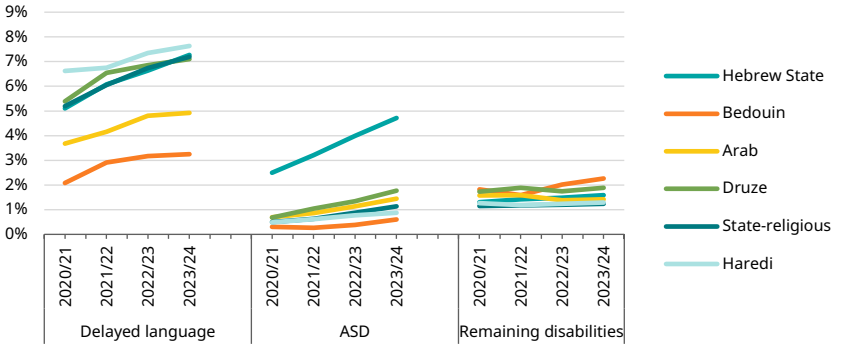
concurrent and consecutive time periods. While this study did not longitudinally track individual children from Tipat Halav through preschool, the timing and age alignment strongly suggest a connection. The connection indicated by the parallel trends of rising delayed language milestone attainment and the growing prevalence of delayed language and ASD among preschoolers underscores the importance of national developmental surveillance as a tool for anticipating future educational needs and trends.

The previous Tipat Halav study also revealed significant gaps in language milestone attainment by SES, indicating that children from lower SES backgrounds face greater risks of language and communication-related disabilities. Consequently, these higher-risk groups are theoretically more likely to require special education services. The role of SES will be explored further in the next sections, where we examine how disability categories vary by educational stream and local SES.

Disability category prevalence by educational stream

Prevalence rates by educational stream were calculated by dividing the number of preschool students by disability category in each educational stream by the total number of preschool students in that stream (Figure 7). For additional context, Appendix Table 5 provides the absolute number of students by disability category and educational stream. The prevalence of the 'remaining disabilities' category remains low across all educational streams, ranging from 1% to 2%. Consistent with the Tipat Halav study, the prevalence of delayed language increases annually across all educational streams, though the rate and magnitude of growth vary. Among students in the Hebrew State, State-religious, and Druze educational systems, prevalence has risen from approximately 5% to 7% over the observed period. Students in Haredi preschools currently exhibit the highest prevalence of delayed language (6.6%–7.6%) but the slowest rate of growth (approximately 15%); if current trends persist, students in Hebrew State, State-religious, or Druze systems may surpass their Haredi counterparts in the coming years. In contrast, those in Arab and Bedouin systems consistently show the lowest prevalence rates. For ASD, students in Hebrew State preschools have the highest prevalence, which has risen from 2.5% to 4.7%. In contrast, the prevalence among the other educational streams has increased on average from 0.4% to 0.7%.

Figure 7. Disability prevalence by educational stream

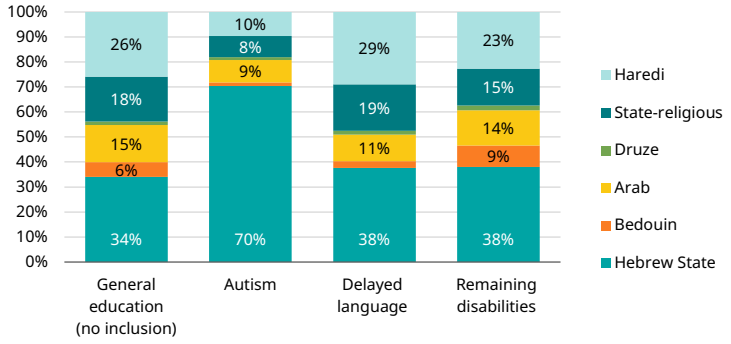


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Building on the previous figure, which analyzed the prevalence of disabilities relative to the overall preschool population, Figure 8 examines the distribution of educational streams within each disability category in comparison to general preschool students. We adopt the same approach that we used earlier. There is a broadly equal or proportionate representation of a given disability across educational streams when each stream's share of students with that disability matches its share of the overall preschool population.

Based on this criterion, the distributions for delayed language and remaining disabilities largely conform to the distribution of preschoolers in general. However, the distribution for ASD differs significantly: 70% of special education students with a primary ASD diagnosis attend Hebrew State preschools, even though this stream accounts for only 34% of general preschool students. Part of this overrepresentation may stem from geographical constraints, discussed earlier, as families who prefer other educational streams may attend Hebrew State preschools if these are the most accessible options. However, the scale of the discrepancy suggests that systemic barriers are likely driving differences in how ASD is identified and classified across educational streams.

Figure 8. Educational stream distribution by disability category compared to general preschoolers, 2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Disability category by local SES

Mirroring the previous section, we examined disability category prevalence rates and distributions by local SES categories. The prevalence of the "remaining disabilities" category remains consistently low across all SES levels, with the highest SES category (9–10) showing the lowest prevalence at less than 1% (see Figure 9). Other SES categories follow the overall trend, with prevalence rates ranging from 1% to 2%.

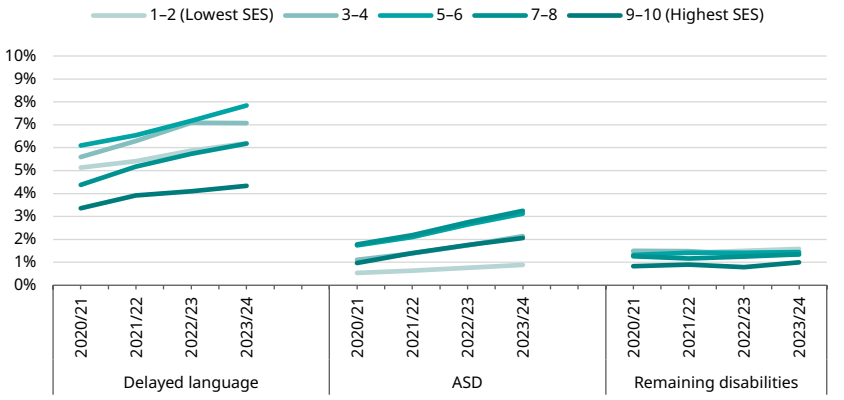
Consistent with findings from the Tipat Halav study, the prevalence of delayed language increases over the years across all SES categories. However, the SES trends only partially match expectations from previous maternal education findings. As anticipated, the highest SES categories (7–10) have the lowest rates. Contrary to expectations, however, the lowest SES category (1–2) shows mid-range prevalence, with the highest rates occurring in the low-to-mid SES range (3–6). The lower rates of students diagnosed with delayed language among students from low SES areas suggest a double disadvantage: high risk of delay coupled with lower rates of early intervention.

For ASD, prevalence was lowest in the lowest SES (1–2) category, and highest in the mid-upper (5–8) range. Figure 10 displays the SES categories distribution within each disability category in comparison to the general preschool

population. Similar to the distribution regarding educational streams (Figure 8), here as well the distribution within delayed language and remaining disabilities slightly deviates from the SES distribution of the overall preschool population, while for ASD, 76% of special education preschoolers with a primary ASD diagnosis come from areas with local SES 5 and above.

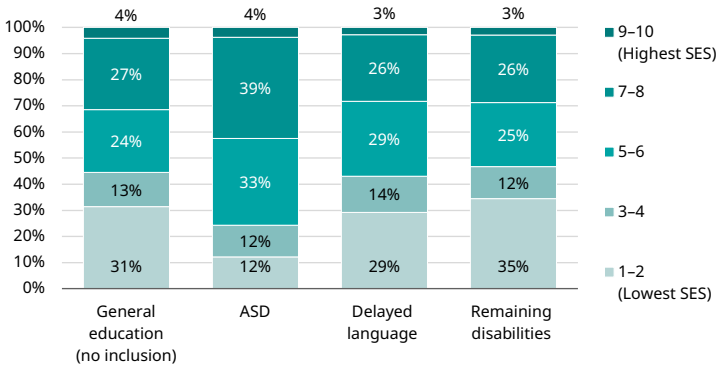
To see if the findings regarding ASD suggest differential access to early diagnosis, in which case the disproportionate representation of students in high SES areas would decrease with increasing grade level, we looked ahead at data among school-age children. We examined the SES category distribution for students with an ASD diagnosis for each grade level to see if the distribution shifts. In the data for the 2023/24 school year, the distribution of local SES among special education students with a primary ASD diagnosis remains relatively consistent across all grade levels, with 71%-78% of these students hailing from SES 5 and above (see Appendix Figure 1). This finding does not point to disparities in early diagnosis but rather suggests systemic SES gaps in ASD diagnosis across all grade levels.

Figure 9. Disability prevalence by local SES



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Figure 10. Local SES distribution by disability category compared to general preschoolers, 2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

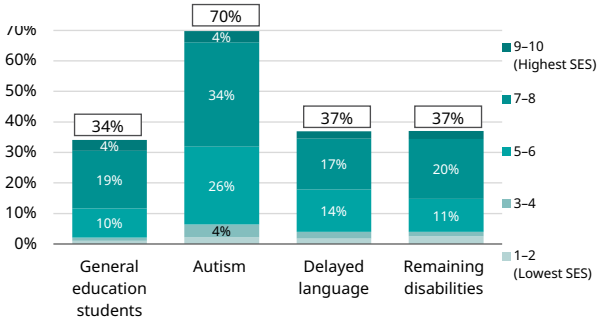
Disability trends by educational stream and SES

The trends observed in special education preschoolers seem to partially confirm the hypothesis derived from the Tipat Halav study that children from low SES homes are at higher risk for developmental language delays. However, the findings regarding ASD tell a different story that warrants further investigation. The distribution of ASD suggests potential biases in who receives these diagnoses and related services, which is especially concerning as the prevalence of ASD continues to rise (CBS). Since local SES unevenly distributes across educational streams, the next step is to examine both factors together. This approach will provide a clearer understanding of how the overlap of educational stream affiliation and SES influences disability prevalence and access to special education services. The number of students in each disability category by educational stream and local SES is presented in the Appendix. To analyze the relationship between educational stream, SES, and disability category, we calculated the composition of educational stream and SES within each disability category and among general preschool students for comparison (Figures 11–16). To enhance clarity, rather than organizing the data by disability category, we present six graphs organized by educational stream. This approach highlights differences in composition by disability category and SES within each educational stream.

Hebrew State

Students in Hebrew State preschools (Figure 11) are overrepresented in all disability categories and across most SES levels, though the degree of overrepresentation varies. The distribution of delayed language and remaining disabilities categories is relatively similar to that of general preschoolers. However, the overrepresentation in ASD is particularly striking. Students from SES 5–6 and 7–8, make up 26% and 34% of those with ASD, compared to 10% and 19% in general preschools. The largest relative difference is in SES 3–4, with students accounting for 4% of ASD but just 1% of general preschoolers.

Figure 11.Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the Hebrew State stream 2023/24

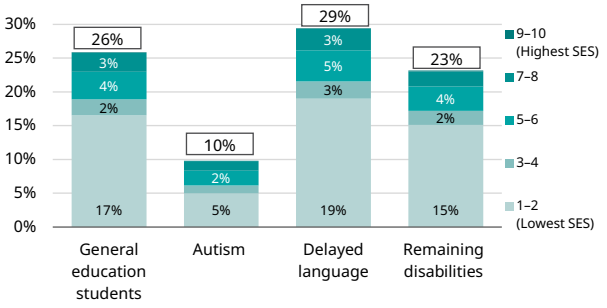


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Haredi

Students in Haredi preschools (Figure 12) exhibit mixed patterns across disability categories. In the delayed language category, they are slightly overrepresented at all SES levels. Conversely, in the remaining disabilities category, students in Haredi preschools are slightly underrepresented across all SES levels. However, the most significant disparity is observed in ASD, where they are substantially underrepresented. This is particularly evident in SES 1–2, where they comprise 17% of general education preschoolers but only 5% of those with an ASD diagnosis.

Figure 12. Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the Haredi stream, 2023/24

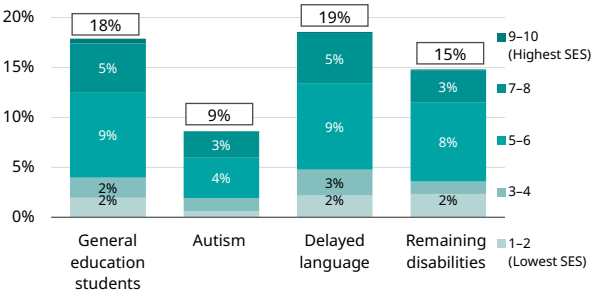


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

State-religious

The distribution of students in State-religious preschools (Figure 13) in the delayed language and remaining disabilities categories is relatively proportional to their presence in the general education preschool population. The slight discrepancy in remaining disabilities is primarily driven by the SES 7–8 category. However, a noticeable gap emerges in the ASD category, particularly in SES 5–6 and 7.

Figure 13. Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the State-religious stream, 2023/24

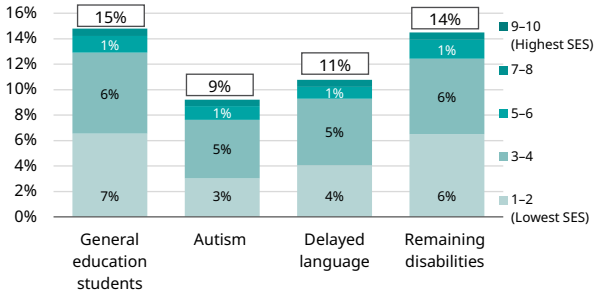


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Arab

Students in Arab preschools (Figure 14) are underrepresented in the ASD and delayed language categories, with SES 1–2 showing the most significant disparities. For example, while students from SES areas 1–2 comprise 7% of general preschoolers, they account for only 3% of ASD diagnoses and 4% of delayed language diagnoses. The distribution for the "remaining disabilities" category aligns more closely with the distribution among general preschoolers.

Figure 14. Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the Arab State stream, 2023/24

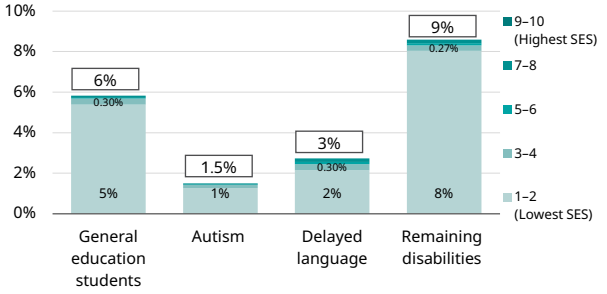


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Bedouin

Students in the Bedouin stream (Figure 15) are underrepresented in both the ASD and delayed language categories, particularly in SES 1–2, where they make up 5% of general preschoolers but only 1% of students with ASD and 2% with delayed language. In contrast, they are notably overrepresented in the remaining disabilities category, accounting for 9% of all students with remaining disabilities, with a majority coming from SES 1–2, where they account for 8% of students with remaining disabilities. This overrepresentation is unique to this stream, with a higher proportion of students from this stream in the remaining disabilities category compared to their overall preschool population representation. This trend may be linked to the types of disabilities reported in this category, which may include more visible or functional disabilities that are more readily identified in the community. Additionally, it may reflect broader demographic and health patterns within the Bedouin population, including those associated with higher rates of consanguinity, which are known to increase the prevalence of congenital conditions (Saad et al., 2014).

Figure 15. Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the Bedouin stream, 2023/24

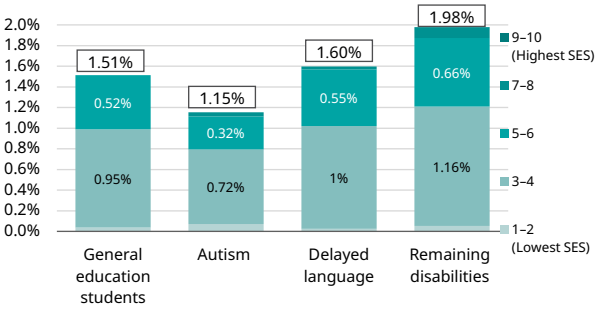


Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Druze

The Druze stream (Figure 16) shows minimal variation in representation across disability categories and SES levels. While they represent a small proportion of the preschool population, their distribution is relatively consistent, with minor fluctuations between categories.

Figure 16. Composition of disability categories vs general education preschoolers in the Druze stream, 2023/24



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

In sum, students in Hebrew State preschools are notably overrepresented among ASD students, particularly in SES levels 5–8, where their proportion far exceeds their share of the general preschool population. In contrast, students in the Haredi, State-religious, Arab, and Bedouin streams show varying degrees of underrepresentation in the ASD category, with the most significant gaps observed among Haredi students in the lowest SES category. Students in the Bedouin stream from the lowest SES category are notably overrepresented in the "remaining disabilities" category, where they account for a higher share of students, possibly linked to the types of disabilities that are more visible and easily identified in the community.

Trends in support types by disability category

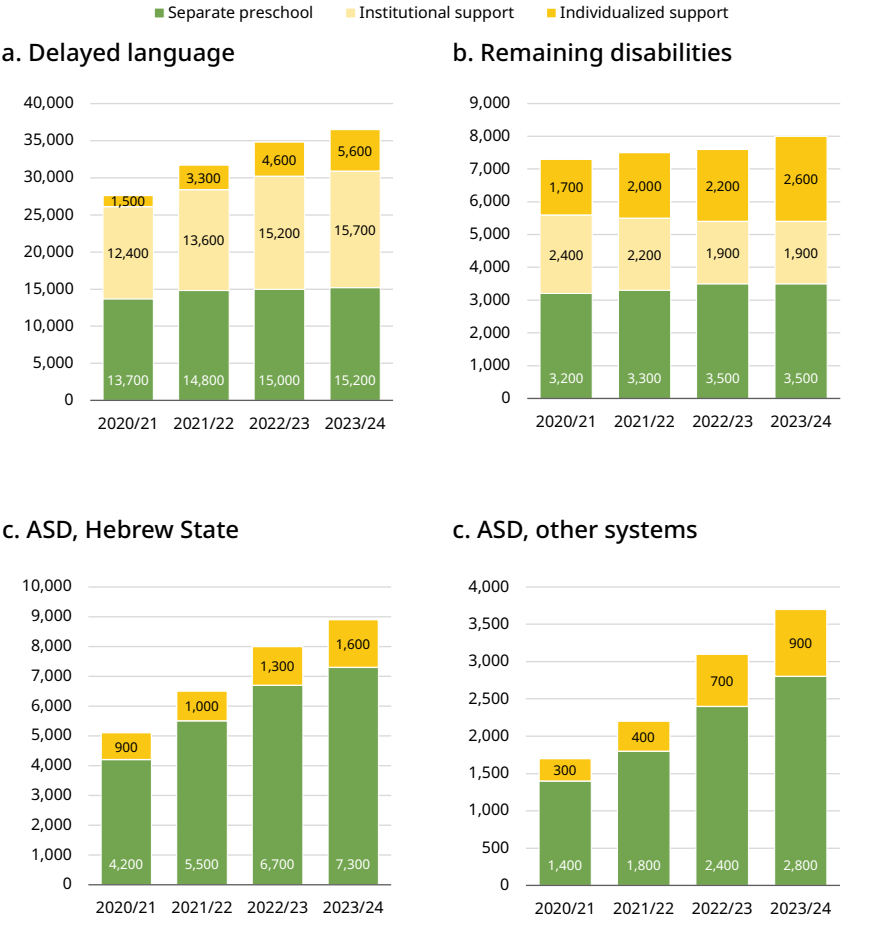
The final step in this analysis was to examine trends in support types by disability category, see Figure 17. Building on the findings related to educational stream distribution, we analyzed delayed language and remaining disabilities without differentiating between educational streams. For ASD, however, we conducted a separate comparison of students in Hebrew State preschools and those in all other streams combined. Local SES was excluded from the analysis to streamline and focus on the most relevant findings, as its influence was less pronounced than the observed differences between educational streams.

For students with delayed language disability, separate preschools served the largest proportion of special education students at the beginning of the period. However, their share decreased from 50% to 42% despite absolute growth in enrollment (see Figure 17a). Institutional support showed a modest increase, rising from 12,400 to 15,700 students, while individualized support soared from 1,500 students to 5,600, increasing from 6% to 15% of special education students in this disability category. These trends suggest shifts in the preferred support type for delayed language as a larger proportion of students receive inclusion over separate preschools. These findings also explain the decrease in the number of students in delayed language preschool classrooms beginning from 2020/21 presented in Figure 1 previously. For the remaining disabilities category, separate preschools served the largest group of special education preschoolers, but their growth over the four years was minimal (see Figure 17b). Interestingly, the number of students in this category receiving institutional support decreased, while individualized support increased by more than 50%.

Figure 17c and 17d display the distribution of support types for special education students with ASD among students in Hebrew State and other educational streams, respectively. What is notable in both figures is that the majority of these students attend separate special education preschools. However, the relative proportions and growth trends between students receiving individualized support and those attending separate preschools differ between Hebrew State and the other streams. In Hebrew State preschools, the relative proportion of these two support types remained stable over the four years, with 82% of students with ASD attending separate preschools and about 18% receiving individualized support. In contrast, among the other educational streams, individualized support rose from 19% to 25% of special education students with ASD, while the proportion attending separate preschools decreased from 81% to 75%.

As noted above, 70% of special education preschoolers with ASD are in Hebrew State preschools, and, as shown here, the majority of them attend separate special education preschools. The rising prevalence of ASD diagnoses in the Hebrew State stream likely contributes to their overrepresentation in special education preschools. To investigate this, we revisited Figure 3b, which shows the distribution of support types by educational stream. We examined the same relationships but excluded students with ASD, see Appendix Figure 2. The key finding is that the proportion of special education students in the Hebrew State stream that attend separate preschools decreased from 60% (including students with ASD) to 48% (after excluding students with ASD). This finding suggests that a significant portion of the gap in separate special education participation in the Hebrew State stream can be attributed to differences in ASD diagnoses. It is possible that some students with an ASD diagnosis who attend separate Hebrew State preschools may prefer other educational streams, but attend a Hebrew State preschool as the best local option. Further research at the individual level is needed to explore this possibility. Of particular interest is whether enrollment factors reflect not only demographic and geographical considerations but also differential access to appropriate diagnosis and educational options across Israel's distinct subpopulations.

Figure 17. Support type by disability category



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Discussion

Early childhood is a critical period for addressing developmental challenges, and special education during the preschool years plays a pivotal role in supporting young children with special needs (Heckman, 2006; Bakken et al., 2017). This study examines trends and disparities in Israel's preschool special education system from 2020/21 to 2023/24. During this period, the number of special education preschool students increased by 36%, while the number of general preschool students declined. This growth reflects a rising demand for special education services and a higher prevalence of diagnosed developmental disabilities among young children.

Separate special education preschools continue to serve the majority of special education students. Although the number of students in these settings has increased, their relative share of the special education population has slightly declined. The decline in this relative share coincides with the growth of inclusion, notably through individualized support, which more than doubled in both numbers and proportion of the preschool student population in just a few years. This shift may stem from an insufficient number of places in separate special education schools. More likely, in our view, the shift suggests that personalized and integrated approaches within the mainstream preschool system are becoming more popular.

In either case, despite the growth in special education enrollment across all educational streams and SES levels, enrollment rates in the different support types remain unequal. Students in the Hebrew State stream are disproportionately represented in separate special education preschools and individualized support, while their counterparts in Arab and Bedouin systems are underrepresented across all support types. These disparities may be attributable to geographic limitations, increased stigma, and reduced access to evaluations, that may hinder special education participation in Arab and Bedouin communities. SES disparities reflect similar trends: children from high SES areas are more likely to receive individualized support, while those from low SES areas depend more heavily on institutional support. This reliance points to gaps in early evaluation and intervention services for disadvantaged communities.

Most of the increase in special education enrollment can be attributed to the rising prevalence of delayed language and ASD diagnoses, which together account for 85% of special education preschool students. This increase aligns with trends observed in our previous Tipat Halav study, which documented a

rise in delayed language milestone attainment amongst infants and toddlers from 2016 to 2022. That study highlighted that children from lower SES backgrounds are at heightened risk for developmentally delayed language. Delayed language prevalence in the current data did not display clear trends related to local SES or educational streams.

In contrast, trends for ASD diagnoses reveal troubling disparities that highlight a concerning pattern. Students in the Hebrew State stream are profoundly overrepresented among preschoolers with ASD, particularly in mid-to-high SES communities, while students from all other streams and lower SES areas are significantly underrepresented. While part of this may be attributed to geographical constraints where families attend Hebrew State preschools as their most accessible option, the magnitude of the disparities suggests that ASD awareness and diagnostic access vary dramatically across educational streams and SES levels. Given that developmental risks identified in our Tipat Halav study were actually higher among lower SES communities, the current findings reveal a troubling double disadvantage: the very populations at heightened risk for developmental challenges face the greatest barriers in accessing ASD evaluations and diagnoses. This means children who could most benefit from early ASD interventions are the least likely to receive them. These diagnostic disparities have broader systemic implications, as they account for a significant portion of the gap in separate special education preschool enrollment between students in the Hebrew State stream and their peers in other streams, raising critical questions about the inclusivity and equity of the special education system.

In summary, this study deepens our understanding of the evolving landscape of preschool special education in Israel, highlighting critical disparities in participation rates across socioeconomic and educational streams. The findings underscore the need for targeted policies to address systemic inequities, ensuring that all children — regardless of background — receive timely evaluations and, where necessary, appropriate support. One promising avenue for intervention is strengthening coordination between the health and education ministries. Developmental surveillance from Tipat Halav clinic visits could be leveraged to project future special education needs, allowing for more proactive resource allocation and early intervention. Improved communication between healthcare providers and educators may also help reduce disparities by ensuring that children — especially those from underrepresented communities — are identified and supported earlier. By addressing the disparities identified in this study and strengthening these foundational years, Israel's education system can be made to better serve all children with special needs.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Number of special education preschoolers, by support type

	Students in special education preschool	Inclusion			Total special education student population	Total general preschool population	Total preschool population
		Institutional support	Individualized support	Total			
2020/21	22,517	14,760	4,500	19,260	41,777	496,451	538,228
2021/22	25,483	15,757	6,734	22,491	47,974	497,946	545,920
2022/23	27,488	17,183	8,843	26,026	53,514	493,859	547,373
2023/24	28,860	17,517	10,700	28,217	57,077	480,598	537,675
Percent change: 2020/21 to 2023/24	28.2%	18.7%	137.8%	46.5%	36.6%	-3.2%	-0.1%

Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Table 2. Number of special education preschoolers, by sector and educational stream

	Hebrew State	Bedouin	Arab	Druze	State-religious	Haredi
2020/21	18,431	1,142	4,590	639	6,271	10,704
2021/22	21,884	1,365	5,211	780	7,318	11,416
2022/23	24,180	1,662	5,836	810	8,301	12,725
2023/24	25,669	1,845	6,100	863	8,997	13,585
Percent change: 2020/21 to 2023/24	39%	62%	33%	35%	43%	27%

Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Table 3. Number of special education preschoolers, by SES

	SES				
	1–2 (Lowest)	3–4	5–6	7–8	9–10 (Highest)
2020/21	11,195	5,496	12,113	11,756	1,217
2021/22	12,169	6,283	13,503	13,373	1,458
2022/23	13,526	7,130	15,096	14,925	1,534
2023/24	14,548	7,381	16,207	15,864	1,654
Percent change: 2020/21 to 2023/24	30%	34%	34%	35%	36%

Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Table 4. Frequency of the five most common types of disabilities in each school year

Year	Disability	Number of students	Percent of students	Cumulative percent
2020/21	Developmental language delay	14,906	35.7%	35.7%
	Developmental and behavioral language delay	12,692	30.4%	66.1%
	Disabilities on autism spectrum/ ASD	6,942	16.6%	82.7%
	Behavioral/emotional disturbances	1,851	4.4%	87.1%
	Learning disabilities/AD(H)D	1,224	2.9%	90.0%
2021/22	Developmental language delay	16,788	35.0%	35.0%
	Developmental and behavioral language delay	14,899	31.1%	66.1%
	Disabilities on autism spectrum/ ASD	8,819	18.4%	84.4%
	Behavioral/emotional disturbances	1,638	3.4%	87.9%
	Learning disabilities/AD(H)D	1,252	2.6%	90.5%

Appendix Table 4 (continued). Frequency of the five most common types of disabilities in each school year

Year	Disability	Number of students	Percent of students	Cumulative percent
2022/23	Developmental language delay	19,695	36.8%	36.8%
	Developmental and behavioral language delay	15,194	28.4%	65.2%
	Disabilities on autism spectrum/ ASD	10,973	20.5%	85.7%
	Behavioral/emotional disturbances	1,737	3.3%	89.0%
	Illness/Rare syndrome	1,546	2.9%	91.8%
2023/24	Developmental language delay	21,860	38.3%	38.3%
	Developmental and behavioral language delay	14,628	25.6%	63.9%
	Disabilities on autism spectrum/ ASD	12,667	22.2%	86.1%
	Illness/Rare syndrome	1,840	3.2%	89.3%
	Behavioral/emotional disturbances	1,792	3.1%	92.5%

Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Table 5. Number of students in each disability category, by sector, educational stream, and SES

		SES				
		1–2 (Lowest)	3–4	5–6	7–8	9–10 (Highest)
Delayed language						
Hebrew State	2020/21	594	585	4,109	4,563	703
	2021/22	573	700	4,393	5,428	812
	2022/23	582	793	4,677	5,817	821
	2023/24	633	768	4,952	5,946	863
Bedouin	2020/21	378	90	47	48	
	2021/22	663	84	34	52	
	2022/23	737	85	37	82	
	2023/24	765	107	37	63	
Arab	2020/21	993	1,418	258	162	
	2021/22	1,179	1,615	307	172	
	2022/23	1,393	1,883	344	208	
	2023/24	1,444	1,871	326	204	
Druze	2020/21	18	256	158	9	
	2021/22	12	319	198	9	
	2022/23	9	349	192	8	
	2023/24	9	355	196	9	
State-religious	2020/21	507	622	2,338	1,229	54
	2021/22	650	721	2,559	1,485	73
	2022/23	703	862	2,887	1,642	85
	2023/24	775	929	3,083	1,756	69
Haredi	2020/21	5,561	777	1,156	929	36
	2021/22	5,753	873	1,278	968	35
	2022/23	6,337	994	1,502	1,048	40
	2023/24	6,773	914	1,644	1,122	38

Appendix Table 5 (continued). Number of students in each disability category, by sector, educational stream, and SES

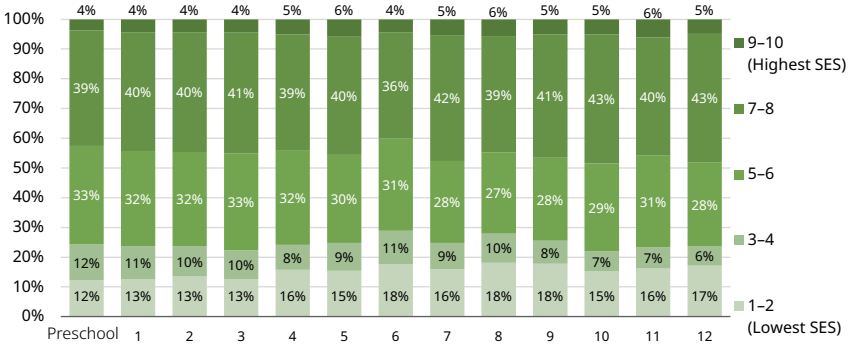
		SES				
		1–2 (Lowest)	3–4	5–6	7–8	9–10 (Highest)
Autism						
Hebrew State	2020/21	181	305	1,912	2,552	227
	2021/22	220	364	2,291	3,104	322
	2022/23	247	442	2,837	3,742	399
	2023/24	273	515	3,144	4,208	447
Bedouin	2020/21	70	9	2	4	
	2021/22	69	7	2	231	
	2022/23	102	12	2	299	
	2023/24	156	18	2	8	
Arab	2020/21	188	271	55	25	
	2021/22	339	78	35		
	2022/23	453	104	46		
	2023/24	372	569	132	61	
Druze	2020/21	7	33	14	2	
	2021/22	8	51	23	4	
	2022/23	10	67	29	4	
	2023/24	9	89	39	5	
State-religious	2020/21	47	71	220	123	2
	2021/22	68	101	266	147	5
	2022/23	83	117	367	242	6
	2023/24	74	165	495	319	9
Haredi	2020/21	349	52	103	118	
	2021/22	440	88	165	134	1
	2022/23	535	130	213	173	1
	2023/24	613	146	269	176	5

Appendix Table 5 (continued). Number of students in each disability category, by sector, educational stream, and SES

		SES				
		1–2 (Lowest)	3–4	5–6	7–8	9–10 (Highest)
Remaining disabilities						
Hebrew State	2020/21	196	92	783	1,464	165
	2021/22	196	119	864	1,398	187
	2022/23	207	127	863	1,453	167
	2023/24	191	112	833	1,503	204
Bedouin	2020/21	448	22	10	14	
	2021/22	417	9	17	9	
	2022/23	545	31	13	4	
	2023/24	617	21	8	14	
Arab	2020/21	428	601	130	60	
	2021/22	515	561	131	44	
	2022/23	483	484	96	38	
	2023/24	499	456	114	44	
Druze	2020/21	6	83	51	2	
	2021/22	5	100	48	3	
	2022/23	3	77	60	2	
	2023/24	4	89	51	8	
State-religious	2020/21	176	73	536	252	21
	2021/22	164	94	577	224	17
	2022/23	156	100	590	256	6
	2023/24	179	96	607	245	10
Haredi	2020/21	1,048	136	231	200	8
	2021/22	1,006	138	274	155	6
	2022/23	1,095	124	283	160	9
	2023/24	1,162	161	275	173	8

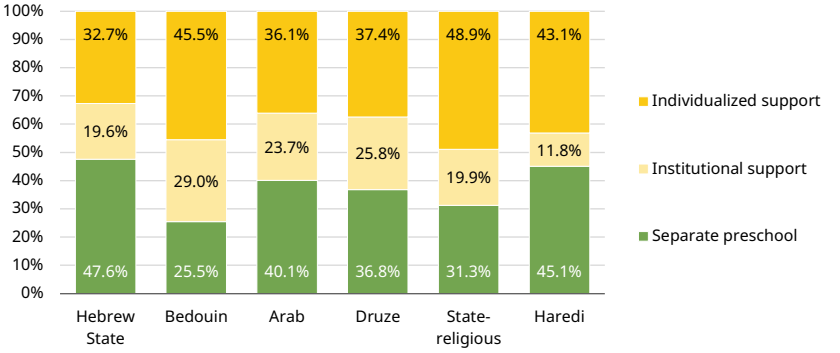
Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Figure 1. Distribution of SES groups among special education preschoolers with autism, by grade level



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education

Appendix Figure 2. Relative distribution of special education support types by education stream, 2023/24 (without preschoolers on the autism spectrum)



Source: Sarit Silverman and Nachum Blass, Taub Center | Data: Ministry of Education