

Full Length Research Paper

“Intercultural mediation”, the institution of learning and the process of educational ‘integration’ and assimilation: The case of Ethiopian Jews in Israel

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The major premise of this paper concerns the existence of an intrinsic connection between the institutional culture of school and students’ dispositions to learning. The data presented shows three things in particular. These are firstly, the strong mono-culture of the Israeli school, secondly, a virtual absence of knowledge, understanding and sensitivity on the part of these schools to how students from different cultural backgrounds learn and, thirdly, how the workings of the school environment impact on the academic development of minority children. My findings suggest that the teaching methods, the social climate of the school and patterns of school work, regarding cultural differences in Israel may have the same effect on academic progress for Ethiopian children as family (cultural) background, neighborhood, peer environment and socio-economic status seem to have for the white urban poor in Western schools. The inequalities imposed on Ethiopian children by their home environment such as poor neighborhood, “immobilized” or “neutralized” culture inadequately reconstituted by the new one, and interruption of cultural transmission to the young at home, are carried along to become the inequalities with which the children confront school life and, hence, future adult life.

Key words: “Intercultural mediation”, the institution of learning and the process of educational ‘integration’ and assimilation.

Purpose and methodological issues

This study is part of a larger study which attempts to identify and clarify social, cultural, pedagogic and epistemological factors influencing learning and cognitive development among Ethiopian Israelis, who emigrated to Israel within the past two decades (Berhanu, 2001). The abrupt transition from rural Ethiopia to modern Israel was not a smooth one for most of them, and has been accompanied by psychological and cultural crises which have seriously affected children’s learning processes and cognitive development (Berhanu, 2005a, 2005b).

The story of how the Ethiopian Jews – known as Falasha, ‘meaning gone to exile’ – survived for so many centuries in exile clinging to their Jewish tradition and how, finally, they came to Israel is fascinating. As to their history and origin, there are contradictory statements and theories, and it had been an intensely debatable issue,

especially in Israel among different religious Jewish authorities, pertaining to, for instance, their rights to Israeli citizenship and authenticity of their Jewishness. It was not until 1973 that they were officially accepted as having the right to “return” to Israel and become Israeli citizens. It is important to recognise that while in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Jews have lived most of their lives in isolation both in time and space. They have a singular, defined traditional way of raising and educating children. Therefore, the abrupt transition from village life in Ethiopia to Israel, which occurred en masse within the past two decades, has been accompanied by adjustment crises which have in turn immensely affected their learning and integration into Israeli society (Berhanu, 2000). From the very start, the absorption of Ethiopian Jews was highly bumpy, to say the least.

Numerous reports show the low educational performance of this population and a high number of dropouts. Ethiopian students are disproportionately represented in special education streams. The existing literature, however, does not tell us much about either the causes of delayed progress, or of the learning problems facing the children and young adults, nor do we know much about the informal learning processes/socialisation and mediated learning experiences among the population. Several studies of learning conditions, modifiability and learning potential have been conducted showing that groups exposed to Learning Potential Assessment Devices (LPAD) (Feuerstein et al., 1979, Feuerstein, 1980) and Mediated Learning Experiences (activities) demonstrate higher learning potential and are able to perform after mediation on a par with the Israeli norm (Kaniel et al., 1991). However, “systematic cognitive enrichment” is required in order to translate this potential into sustainable classroom performance (Kozulin et al., 1997).

Here I argue that before intervention programmes of the above nature are designed and introduced, there is need for baseline assessment, with a detailed descriptive study on the population’s cultural repertoire, educational and child rearing practices, beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, tradition, culturally determined philosophies of education, conception of child development, parental attitudes; the nature, pattern, intensity and quality of mediational process and behaviours; specific characteristics of adult-child interaction, structuring of meaning and social network – including story telling, dramatisation and role playing, music, songs, dance and gestures, and graphic and iconic forms of mediation. The institutional culture of schools, power discourse, minority-majority relationships (“intercultural mediation”) and the politics of “difference” (“Otherness”), both at school and at the general system level, need to be investigated. All of these are significant for learning and development.

This paper has four main purposes. These are, firstly, to map patterns of transition from “home” to school; secondly, to discuss ‘cross cultural mediation’ (including school culture vis-à-vis ‘home culture’); thirdly, to present patterns of home-school interaction, student’s conception and awareness of this ‘cross cultural mediation’ and the “integration process”, and; fourthly, abstraction of generalities based on this analysis. The article was written mainly based on studies conducted at school settings.

I visited three schools in and around Jerusalem. One is a religiously oriented primary school for girls. The other two are high schools, one for girls and one for boys. The high schools are religiously oriented boarding schools. They are run by the non-secular department of the Ministry of Education. The reasons why I chose to work with these schools are, firstly, a disproportionate number (about three-quarters according to current statistics) of the Ethiopian student population attend religious boarding

schools, secondly, my host institution (the ICELP, which served as my bridge to contact the schools) had programmes of group LPAD testing and Instrumental Enrichment lessons in the schools.

In the two high schools, a total of 16 students with ages ranging from 13 to 18 were interviewed. Loosely structured interview guide lines were used. In addition, five teachers, four social workers and several “cultural interpreters” and a principal were interviewed, using an interview guide set in a “free wheeling” quality.

In one of the schools, Yeshivat Tkuma boys high school, I had an “assistant teaching” role or kind of classroom helper. This participatory research afforded me opportune moments to have extensive informal conversation both with the students and the staff. In the girl’s primary school, I had only limited access, partly because of administrative redtape and partly for religious reasons. With a view to having a broader perspective about “intercultural mediation”, “learning differences” and the educational integration process, I also “talked” to a dozen “prominent Ethiopian leaders” and intellectuals who are knowledgeable of the community’s past and present condition. These leaders are currently engaged in issues affecting the community.

The questions in the interview guide are broad and varied. However, I am not going to use all the information in this study, limiting myself principally to highlighting the different facets of the “integration process”, ‘intercultural mediation’ and educational progresses and failures.

My work is planned with the intention that my ethnographically inspired investigation may help inform, and be a useful tool for future intervention programmes which take cultural variability into account. I hope as well that educators may be able to draw on the concepts and tools derived from the work to develop an understanding of an educational setting in a way which will allow them to plan educational programmes which refer back to and “include” rather than negate or exclude the culture of the learner.

The study analyzes the data in the light or prism of two-pronged theoretical views. The first is the perspective of inclusive education within discourses on (special) educational research and provisions (Clark et al., 1995; Thomas and Loxley, 2001; Persson, 2003). In this vein, the last two decades’ research shows not only the lack of well founded and sound theories in special education (Skrtic, 1986, 1991; Helldin, 1997; Clark et al., 1995, 1998; Emanuelsson, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 20003; Persson, 1998; OECD, 1995; Ahlström et al., 1986; Westling, 2003) but also the crisis in special education knowledge. In particular, the overrepresentation of minority pupils in special educational programmes has been a cause for concern and hot discussions dividing the academic community. It has been noted in a number of countries that ethnic minority groups are disproportionately represented in special classes/schools (Berhanu, 2001; Coard, 1971; Brady et al., 1983; Bourne

et al., 1994; Gilborn, 1990; Losen and Orfield, 2002; Lahden-perä, 1997; Skolverket, 1998, 2003; SOU, 1997).

The above studies and a large number of other similar studies indicated the significance of inclusive education, cultural diversity and intercultural education as central themes in the educational arena. As cultural pluralism becomes increasingly a social reality, education authorities are grappling with the new phenomena to reconcile the conventional monolithic educational approach with the emerging pluralistic trends—cultural, racial and ethnic diversity—which requires accommodation of the cultural norms of pluralism (there are some interesting Swedish studies by Arnstberg, (1993); Daun et al., (1992); Rojas, (2001) on this issue. The conflicts between the culture of the school and the culture of the home, minority-majority relationships, values, identity matters, language and cognitive styles and strategies have become a new focus of attention (Berhanu, 2001). Artilis (2003) recently noted that minority overrepresentation and inclusion pose important challenges to special educators' understandings of culture, the role of culture in visions of disability, and the creation of a research ethos that is mindful of cultural differences' (p. 165). The complexities that cluster around conventional notions of assimilation, integration (inclusion) and segregation including policy matters will merit some degree of analysis in relation to my focus group that are overrepresented in those special services out of all proportion to their number.

The second perspective applied in this study is a combination of the socio-cultural-historical theory of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1934, 1978; Valsiner and Van den Veer, 2000) and the social theory of learning model (Wenger, 1998). Both perspectives take social interactions into account and focus on the structure of activities as historically constituted, and meaning, practice, community and identity are treated as major components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing. In particular, the Vygotskian pedagogical focus is on bridging the gap between the historical state of an activity and the developmental stage of a person with respect to that activity—for instance, the gap between the current state of a language and a child's ability to speak that language. The purpose is to define a “zone of proximal development” in which learners who receive help can perform an activity they would not be able to perform by themselves (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1987; Wenger, 1998). The Vygotskian assumption of the origin of cognitive development within the specific activities and contexts of human, mediated social interaction has attracted a large number of researchers with interdisciplinary backgrounds rather than a single discipline based efforts.

As to methodological aspects, this study is part of a larger research project completed two years ago (Berhanu, 2001). It is an ethnographic-based study. The specific methods I have applied for carrying out the study are many-fold ranging from one-on-one interviews, to

observations of home activities, classrooms and other delimited areas of social interaction to long term participant observation by taking a new role in the target group's cultural setting.

My general epistemological beliefs and ontological concessions are mainly in keeping with this new wave of sociocultural perspectives in education research as articulated recently in Sweden by, for instance, Säljö (2000). The descriptions I present here are not assumed as natural, given and self-evident. I do not claim that all the categories in my work are stable. Neither do I claim that the knowledge I want to present is absolutely certain. My work is in line with engagement, multiple voices and willingness to be self-reflective rather than adherence to “brutal facts”. In no way am I in a position to fully and accurately present my subjects or “even myself” (Lather, 1994; Lather and Smithies, 1997). I am aware of the presence in my work of ambiguities and difficulties of language.

None the less, I have done my best to provide systematic depth analysis and I have tried to write authentically and critically about the narratives offered in ways that serve the public good, including theory building, generating new knowledge and shaping public policies with a view to effecting social change. I give as much attention to normative research/evaluation, rigour and trustworthiness as I do to social effect and justice. That means my subjects' participation and involvement has been an essential part of the research process (Lather, 1997, 2000; Lather and Smithies, 1997). To the extent possible, I have maintained anonymity of the participants. I made every effort to get my respondents' informed consent, to respect their lives, understand them and to continually investigate my relationship with them, and to question my interpretation of them. My research approach is therefore anchored both within and against dominant conceptions of research methodology in social science by weaving issues of ethics, validity and epistemology.

Most of the evidence has been gathered from my study in school settings, but I also include documentary surveys. The interpretation, analysis and categorising of data and the process of theme formation are based on both emic and etic approaches. This is important, as both of these forms of analyses represent an abstraction of the field. One experience near, the other filtered through categories driven theory and in that sense experience distant. Both forms of analyses are used in ethnographic descriptions (Beach, 1997) in which inductive and deductive methods of categorising and coding are used interchangeably. The research process involved discovering and deriving patterns in the data and looking for general orientations. The most important guiding principle in the interpretation of the data and theme formation was the over all research purpose, i.e. factors impacting on the mediating and learning processes of the Ethiopian Jewish children and youth at both micro and

macro level. Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out that this kind of an approach to data analysis and interpretation involved 'making sense of the data in ways which will facilitate the continuing unfolding of the inquiry and lead to an optimal understanding of the phenomenon being studied'.

Intercultural Mediation, Integration and Assimilation (Conceptual clarification)

I am not sure if anyone has used the term 'Intercultural mediation' before or whether I instigated its use. Be that as it may, I know for sure that Skuy's (1997) insightful work on the cross cultural implications of MLE has inspired my approach quite a lot.

Regardless of who actually coined the term, for my purpose, I define intercultural mediation as a process of promoting a pluralistic society in which all members can exercise egalitarian co-operation, reciprocity, co-existence and integration while simultaneously encouraging the diverse communities and/or cultural/ethnic groups comprising the larger system to foster 'connectedness' and identification with their primordial groups in an effort to enrich and nurture meaningful life both at micro and macro societal levels.

My understanding/conception of the term 'intercultural mediation' is similar to the concept of integration. However, the concept of integration as used in the research literature seems to be interpreted in different ways. Emanuelsson (1998) pointed out the need to clarify misunderstandings evolving from a misuse or 'imprecise use' of the term integration – as used, in particular, in relation to issues of schools and to education in general. My understanding of integration is congruent with him and also with Rosenqvist, (1992, 1996) Emanuelsson, (2000a, 2000 b). In discussing research efforts in special education, focussing on integration and segregation – inclusion and exclusion—Emanuelsson (1998) stressed that Integration and inclusion as goals are both ideologically founded on views of humans in a democracy. Everyone is said to be of equal value and therefore important as a member of and a resource to society. Individual characteristics differ but this is the normal condition of human togetherness and not anything deviant in itself.... Integration means challenges. It is therefore very important that the challenges occur in the right places and situations and with people who will develop better possibilities for full and whole participation for all members of society. It is in environments like classrooms that the conditions for integration either are created or developed, or are hampered by segregating policies and processes. However, segregating forces are often left undiscovered and /or unaddressed; sometimes they are even consciously hidden.

Apart from its use in educational settings, integration at a wider level is conceived in my work as an objective promoting the development of a genuinely plural society

in which different ethnic identities or subcultures are recognised and accepted as equally valid within the context of the wider socio-cultural environment. The process of integration and/or intercultural mediation is in opposition to the concept of assimilation that involves the abandonment of minority (cultures) in favour of the dominant culture. Assimilation or absorption processes strip the minority group of its original customs, tradition and practices, and require the immigrants to reorganise their cognitive and emotional maps to fit the core values, norms, behaviours and customs of the majority.

Sheshet-ha-yamin Girls High School

Sheshet-ha-yamin is located 15 kms north-east of Jerusalem. The school is situated in the middle of a newly founded Jewish settlement, carefully protected and secluded from the surrounding Arab community. The students, however, come from all parts of Israel, have different social and cultural backgrounds from the three main Jewish groups: Ashkenazim, Sephardim and/or Oriental Jews.

The Ethiopian students constitute about 15 percent of the total student population. At the beginning of my work the newest students had been at the school 8 months whilst the senior students had been studying there for between four to five years. According to one of my informants, a social worker, the standard of the school is quite good and has a reputation for not failing many students. I interviewed 11 of the Ethiopian students, 6 new immigrants and 5 veterans. Each interview took between one and one and half hours.

Yeshivat Tkuma Boys High School

The school is located in the outskirts of Jerusalem about 20 minutes drive from down town. It is a strictly religious school. The vast majority of the students are native Israelis and white. According to the social worker and the principal, the school has some reputation in academic and religious studies, although it is not an elite school. The school enrolls those who had ambitions to join elite schools but were unable to make it for different reasons. The school has existed for 25 years, and the top leadership is dominated by elderly religious figures. This form of leadership has made the school, according to one teacher, less susceptible to changes and adaptation to current trends. Some of the teachers belong to the Haredim, an ultra-orthodox segment within Judaism. There are no women teachers. The morning sessions are devoted to religious lessons. Secular subjects are offered in the afternoons.

Ethiopian students in the school constitute 10 percent of the total student population. At the beginning of the 1998/99 academic year, there were 32 new Ethiopian students, none of whom were veterans (Vatikim, in Hebrew). At around the turn of the millennium, eight boys

out of the 32 were already transferred to low status and vocational high schools with diverse “specialised professional support systems”. Of these, six had ‘dropped out’ mainly for academic and personal reasons. In the girls’ high school dropout cases or transfers to other schools were not that common. I interviewed five students extensively in a less formal manner. The following two themes of discussion and/or interview excerpts give a summary of these interviews. Participant observation data mainly from the two schools provide further insight possibilities.

(a) Conflicting values and the assimilation process

As stated elsewhere in this paper, schools, and especially boarding schools in Israel, play an enormous role in socialising and re-socialising students into the ‘mono-culture oriented’ and inflexible workings of the institution of learning. The process of mediation is like a one-way street with very little consideration given to groups of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. This applies especially to those groups of students whose culture is strikingly unlike that of “mainstream” students. The lopsided intercultural mediation seems to have deprived the formation of a central arena for the promotion of multicultural integration and co-existence (Berhanu, 2001).

Most aspects of the Ethiopian culture that Ethiopian students are familiar with appear to be incompatible with the ‘norms’, valued behaviours and ‘fossilised’ practices and routines of the school, according to my observation in all the three schools (Wagaw, 1993). As can be expected, the coping process and feelings of alienation are acute, making the learning process less interesting and more daunting (Berhanu, 2001).

Despite the rough process of re-socialisation and assimilation, many of the Ethiopian students are progressing quite well at school, considering their very different socio-cultural and economic background. This can be seen in my study at the girls’ school, although in the boys school, the progress is less encouraging. However, this statement of mine does not apply to all schools throughout Israel. It is true that Ethiopian students can not be categorised as a homogenous group by any standards. There are, within the group, enormous individual differences. Therefore, the coping process and success stories vary from individual to individual. This variation among students may have something to do with parental education, family status (single parent or ‘intact family’) and personal characteristics and traits, for instance, motivation and attitudes of the individual student (personal communication; discussion with two social workers).

School environment, patterns of school work and intercultural communication:

Generally, the students in both schools, especially those

in the boy’s school, have less negative attitudes towards the teachers and the school. What seemed to bother most of them is the difference between the culture of the family and the school. In addition, the school system in Ethiopia is sharply different from the Israeli school system. This could pose some adjustment problems, especially at the early stages of schooling in Israel. For instance, many students seem to have difficulties in making ‘real’ friends with native Israelis and life at boarding school seems to require them to adjust not only to the academic demands of the school but also to the general school environment. These include dormitory regulations, canteen services, religious rituals, extra curricular activities (including joint participation with other students from different grades and backgrounds). In the girls’ school, the communication between Ethiopian students and non-Ethiopian students is much better than in the boys’ school. Even so, there are, as many girls mentioned difficulties in making close and best friends (see also the boys reaction on this matter in the next pages).

The interviewees expressed the problem in the following ways: A new immigrant girl responded:

I like to mix with Israeli students. Actually, I have several friends. But, we have not as yet come too close. I want it that way. But, you know, Israeli girls are fast, they make noise, they are not shy at all; they talk unashamedly. It is hard to share secret matters with them... (Hanna)

Another new immigrant girl put it thus:

The Israeli girls are honest, talk about everything openly but we Ethiopians are shy. I think we are not honest in relating our feelings, unlike them... (Aster)

One veteran girl who is loosing command of her Amharic stated:

To me, the Hebrew language is not a problem any more. I know the Israeli culture very well. In fact, I know more about the Israeli way than the Ethiopian way. And yet, I still have problems to reveal and share all what I feel in my stomach with the native (white) Israelis. My relationship with them is on a surface level.

Girma: “Why?”

I just cannot explain. I don’t understand it myself. May be they do not know what ‘secret’ means. I have so much to confide in with someone. The Israelis do not keep secrets.

The girl referred not only to her school colleagues but also to her teachers and the school administration. She further complained that some of the teachers annoy me. They favour the Israeli students. They openly tell us that we don’t respect the religious law strictly. They approach

us when our problem is already chronic, not at the outset of our problem. They are indifferent towards us... It is up to you whether you want to learn or not. (Sarah)

According to the social worker, this girl has an academic problem which is getting worse from year to year. Here, I am not trying to make a strong statement or generalisation, but I see some slight patterns in the students' responses which reveal that high achievers in school appear to perceive the intercultural communication, the coping processes of assimilation and the school environment in 'less negative' ways than the low achievers. This assessment was based on the students' 1999/2000 academic report / cumulative grade point averages. It also fits with various theories on learning, individual development and integration such as status deprivation theory, sub-cultural formation theory, cultural identity theory and differentiation-polarisation theory (Furlong, 1985).

In the boys' school, on the other hand, one observes a different pattern: both high achievers and low achievers (including those who 'dropped out') related their negative experiences directly with the native boys in sport and other joint activities. When playing football, the game becomes rough and physical confrontation prevails. The interviewed boys complained also about the excessive attention given to religious lessons. They generally perceived their experiences with their teachers, school administration and other services positively. However, many of the boys did not like the concentration of a large number of Ethiopian students in one school. I have observed a number of conflicts even among the Ethiopian boys themselves. Two students who left the school admitted to me that one of the reasons for their withdrawal was the tension and misunderstandings among the new immigrants (Berhanu, 2001).

Therefore, there is almost no pattern that indicates a relationship between academic achievement and perception of the school experiences at the boys' school. As stated earlier, the perceived negative experiences of both high achiever and low achiever boys related mainly to their conflicts with native boys, excessive attention to religious subjects and physical and verbal abuses among the Ethiopian boys themselves. There were mixed responses to other questions that appraise the mediation and integration process in a school setting.

Recognition of the integration problem is not restricted to the pupils. For instance, as Avi, a principal, indicated:

Ethiopian children live in two worlds, the world of their parents and their schooling world. The students feel increasingly part of the new society whereas parents are left far behind in the absorption process. So the rift between parents and children is huge. These conflicting processes appear to have inhibiting effects on the children's learning. The students need a lot of emotional support... It would have been easier for us to teach them

'through' their culture. It could help the teaching-learning process to be aware of their cultural baggage. But, teachers don't have guidance on how to deal with the conflicting values and inter group interaction... I believe also the curriculum needs to be adjusted.

The lack of knowledge of the Ethiopian culture by Israeli teachers and students alike has been pointed out in most of the interviews. An English teacher put it succinctly:

We teachers are not sensitive enough to the cultural variable. (Yael)

A social worker reported that she is doing her best to do something in that direction emphasising that we want these children to not feel ashamed of their culture, ashamed of their parents. But, it was not an easy work. The support the school normally expects from a parent is absent. Colour is also a problem. The Ethiopian's dark complexions single them out, and societal attitude is still a big problem. So the Ethiopian students, I believe, need help to cope with the process of absorption. (Noami)

An 18-year-old veteran student said:

There was very little done to introduce our culture at a school setting. Other students think we have no culture, we are primitive. And I also think that even many of us have internalised a feeling of shame about our culture and background because they do not seem to have place here. (Ilanit)

The Ethiopian students have diverse views about 'proper student behaviour', school rules and regulations, teacher-student relationships and the two (Ethiopian and Israeli) school systems. Even if there were some common patterns of responses and views, there were also strikingly different views among both the new and veteran students as seen in the following excerpts taken from interviews with two 13 year old new immigrant girls:

Here in Israel school tasks are difficult, in Ethiopia it is easy. In Ethiopia students are disciplined. They respect teachers. Teachers are very strict, they can punish, smack and admonish you constantly. And I think it is very good. Here they tell you to leave the classroom when you disturb or they refer you to the authorities in charge of the school. In worst cases they will throw you out of school...Another problem is that you do not repeat grades in Israel. Even if you don't do well, they push you forward to the next grade. (Eden)

Eden's classmate has a different view:

Here in Israel school work is easier. In Ethiopia it is difficult. Here they teach you according to your age. In Ethiopia the disciplinary measures are harsh, brutal. Here teachers talk to you, make efforts to talk to you as a person and help change your bad habits. In Ethiopia there is a lot of indifference on the part of teachers. The

classes were too large. In Ethiopia when I went to the second grade we were 95. We had problems with school materials... also, as a result of this 'shifting system' in Ethiopia we studied only three or four hours a day. But, here we study the whole day. Moreover, in Israel the teaching methods are very different; they want us to actively participate in school work, they focus on independent learning and demonstration. (Tigist)

Birtukan, a veteran student who came to Israel at the age of 7 seemed to feel unsure about gender equality, and disapproved of the Israeli girls' lack of discipline. She said:

Here girls talk more freely. They are restless, loud and unashamed. In Ethiopia girls listen to what adults say. Here they don't listen. And the authorities say children should be free and less controlled. That will jeopardise discipline and order. (Birtukan)

Many of the boys also shared with me their concern about Israeli girls' assertiveness and lack of shyness. The boys are worried that Ethiopian girls have already started imitating the typical Israeli culture. All the boys reported that they feel threatened by the drastic change in gender roles and behaviour.

As Alem, a 15-year-old boy, stated:

In Ethiopia as a man you can have control over your wife, you can order and discipline her. I would like to have it that way. I don't want to be pushed around by a woman.

These are typical comments uttered by tens of the boys I worked with, especially the new immigrants (Olim, in Hebrew).

Home-school interaction

As stated in earlier work (Berhanu, 2001), the home-school interaction leaves much to be desired. What concerns the educational authorities most is parents' conceptions of their responsibilities in their children's school life and the growing rift between the home world and the school world. Parents tend to be comfortable if their children's school is religiously oriented. They perhaps feel a sense of assurance that their children will not stray away from the proper path. Most parents declare openly that their reason for being in Israel is strongly tied to a spiritual drive. They have always felt great longing for Israel as the Promised Land, and are committed to a strict, ancient form of Judaism. To what extent this religious zeal will persist in Israel remains to be seen. Elias, a prominent Ethiopian figure with a high post, stated:

When 80 percent of Ethiopian children were sent to religious schools, parents agreed. They genuinely thought their children would benefit a lot and become good citizens. These parents do not know the difference

that exists between schools. Most of those underprivileged religious schools could have already been closed were it not for Ethiopian students. A school is good enough for parents if they are told by their children that for example they pray three times a day at their school. When it comes to education the major hindrance in school progress is that Ethiopian students are treated as a group not on an individual basis. Special education was prescribed as the only solution for educational problems which effectively reduced inter-group interaction and thus mutual understanding and accommodation. There are other ways of solving problems related to education. Most children are referred to special classes without the knowledge or approval of parents...

An Ashkenazi social worker at one of the schools reported:

Ethiopian parents trust the school compared to veteran Israelis. They respect teachers. They are however unaware of our activities at school partly because of the language problem... When we call meetings they don't show up 90 percent of the time. So our biggest problem is to bring the parents closer to the school.

Raffi, an Ethiopian cultural interpreter and religious subject's teacher commented:

When Ethiopian parents bring their children to school for the first time, they would tell us 'please punish' (kitu) the children, educate them strictly, please take over them from us and help us as parents. They want to transfer full responsibilities to us. They respect and accept everything that the teachers say. The Israeli (ferenjoch) parent challenges the teachers, they demand more and they closely follow their children's school progress. Another big problem is the tension caused by the differences between children's and parents' value systems which is widening as children spend most of their time in boarding schools. While in Ethiopia the relationship between parents and children was stable and smooth because parents' authority is unchallenged and the parents' instant reproach and physical punishment 'correct' children. Now they expect us to take over parental responsibility. They just cannot see that it is their duty to be partner in the school process. They don't call us, they don't show up. Many don't know the school's address, many are sick. A large number of parents are single mothers. There is also the problem of language. You find all types of problems with our people...

Most of the students reported that they have responsibilities regarding support for family. From time to time they have to cancel classes to help their parents as translators in hospitals, banks and even when shopping. It seems that parents, especially older ones, are increasingly alienated from intergroup interaction. So, the

children's responsibility is not only confined to educating themselves but also to 'mind' their parents business. This social process is an expected phenomena given the background of the parents vis-à-vis the Israeli mode of life. This 'reversed supportive bond' between parents and children has somehow privileged children and magnified the tension in intracultural communication and this makes parents unable to have control over their lives. These things may have some impacts on the children's later intellectual development and school success.

(b) Learning characteristics, cognitive styles and school performance (progress)

A smoother and effective intercultural mediation will ensue and flourish only when there exists mutual understanding and sensitive awareness of the perspective of the Other. This applies especially to the group which is on its way to abandoning most of its core values and beliefs and behavioural norms as a result of a meeting between two cultures of differing, though not necessarily conflicting, values and life styles –including learning characteristics – with cognitive and affective components.

In discussing implementation of MLE (Mediated Learning Experiences) principles in the education process, Skuy (1997) outlined that:

...The concept of mediation involves inter alia the ability to understand and take a perspective other than one's own, and thus to engage in empathy... Feuerstein's specific parameters of mediated learning are themselves as emotionally or affectively based as they are cognitive. Thus, mediation forms the basis for integration among the dimensions of human functioning.

Thinking patterns, communication styles and linguistic expressions:

From my observations and interview data, the differing patterns of thinking, styles of communication and linguistic expressions of the Ethiopian group are quite clear. This cultural uniqueness, despite its appropriateness and usage for the group's survival in the Ethiopian physical and human environment, has not been harnessed to the advantage of Ethiopian students in the new cultural context. For instance, Ethiopian students' politeness and reservation were misunderstood and perceived as a form of weakness. It was not uncommon to hear from both teachers, other students and the society at large, that Ethiopians are naive and that they show a lack of experience and informed judgement. In particular, Ethiopian students' shyness in classroom activities and unchallenging responses toward teachers have been a source for such labellings (see the interview excerpts below).

Ethiopians come from an educational system and a culture wherein students expect teachers (senior mediator) to initiate communication (large power distance). However, the standard behaviour in Israel is that teachers expect students to initiate communication and take responsibility for their own learning. Independence and self-reliance are looked upon with favour, whereas contrasting behaviour such as "dependency" and help seeking can often be perceived as signs of immaturity. In the Israeli system students strongly challenge teachers and in some cases the teacher can even be made to lose face. As a whole 'face consciousness' is weak in Israel, whereas in Ethiopia, it is strong and efforts are often made so that neither the teacher nor student should ever be made to 'lose face'. Most often Ethiopian students who had some formal educational experience in Ethiopia find it difficult to strike a balance between the extremes of "their two cultures".

An Ashkenazi social worker remarked:

I have worked many years with Ethiopian students. I like them very much. They behave well, respect teachers and the other school staff, yet you never know what they have in their minds. From time to time teachers inform me that they cannot be sure if these students follow up or brood over something else. Most of these students don't talk much about their problems or other concerns until after the situation seems to be out of control... They are so secretive, suspicious and ambiguous...They don't challenge the teachers in the way other Israeli students do. They seem to expect special encouragement and extra support to be active and confident in class activities... Teachers are not trained in dealing with all types of students and communicative manners...there is a lot of things that we want them to change as quickly as possible in order to facilitate school success. For instance, we want them to be straight, open, honest about what they want and feel..(Ruth).

An Ethiopian who spent half of her life in North America and is currently writing her Masters thesis on the community's collective identity and integration process remarked in a similar way:

The predominant assumption and widely held beliefs about my edot (ethnic community) is that we are naive, less informed, suspicious, backward etc. They say nice things also, but these nice terms are in a way devaluing and have elements of negative connotations if you understand the language very well. For instance, statements such as 'they are too kind', 'they are too polite', 'they are too respectful', 'they are unspoiled', they are very shy', and so on. I had experienced a lot of these labellings when I did my primary and junior high school studies in a religious boarding school...(Devorah)

A veteran Ethiopian teacher reported:

..for those students who had school experience in

Ethiopia, the condition may be difficult to adjust to the Israeli school culture. In Ethiopia there is a different style of teacher-student relationship. For example, the language we use to address teachers, how we sit in classrooms, how we attend to lessons, how we put questions and answer questions and so on are different from the culture of school here in Israel. The shy, reserved, dignified and enigmatic (Mistrawi) nature of our students have as much to do with their home culture as it is a carryover from our early school experiences in Ethiopia. This seems to confuse Israeli teachers. It is not unusual to hear from teachers statements such as 'they don't understand!', 'they are too shy!', 'they are very natural!', 'they are too kind!' 'they are naive!' etc. Little effort is made to understand the student's family (cultural background) and experiences, health and social matters related to the abrupt transition into a new way of life... Now a days, things are getting a little bit better at least in the schools where I have been working. More and more Ethiopians, with teaching experience, are coming to schools as more kind of "cultural interpreters" or assistant teachers. But, it takes a long while before we do something tangible to bridge the wide gap in communication patterns between the school and our students. It is this level of misunderstanding that leads our children to be referred to special education or low level school in disproportionate numbers... (Rahmin).

As regards misunderstandings and cultural disparities that lead to wrong assessment and classification, Shula Mola (Ethiopian descent) reported as follows in a recent interview in the Jerusalem post (May, 18: 2000), thus: My own brother was almost sent to special education when he was in first grade... My mother was sick and he was scared, so he started acting up. They summoned my mother to a meeting of the placement committee, but she did not know how to get there, and she did not really understand what it was about. But I got involved. He is in a regular high school now.

The polite and soft way of uttering views which Ethiopian students were familiar with in Ethiopia seems to be interpreted as insecurity or lack of self-confidence in Israel according to data pertaining to teachers' comments on students. In Israel, instead of a soft politeness, "assertiveness"—the right to be yourself—"challengingness" and "rugged individualism" appear to be an ideal. This corresponds to the assertive education models employed in this country where the bonded self, individual morality and individual autonomy are stressed (Aviram, 1993). In contrast, in Ethiopia, the boundary between self and society often appears to be vague. This aspect of Ethiopian culture is still deeply rooted among the students and we can see a virtual absence of intercultural mediation in school settings. The mediating culture (the Israeli culture) and the mediated culture (the Ethiopian culture) are connected through a "one way rush highway", leaving the mediated culture unable to share its cultural capital as it is swamped by the more aggressive

Israeli culture. Ethiopian cultural identity and its potential contribution to the Israeli society as a whole is ignored (interview excerpts below; also Holt, 1998; Weingrod, 1995; Wagaw, 1993; Halper, 1987. As Skuy (1997) has emphasised:

It is in the combined existence of the parameters of sharing and individuation that the formula for multicultural co-existence is found: the contribution of unique and self-fulfilled individuals and cultures to a common whole.

This one-sided intercultural mediation can be seen in some of my interviews. A religious studies teacher commented thus:

...we want these children to be as normal and regular Israeli citizen as possible in the shortest possible period. We help them to study religious subjects several hours a day. It makes it easier for them to be fully accepted and adjust to the Israeli way. We want to avoid any suspicion that they are not devoted or authentic Jews. These changes in religious affairs as well as cultural lives such as quick acquisition of the Hebrew language, changes in customs, behaviour, mentality etc. facilitate their full absorption...(Yakob).

"Lack of a critical approach to learning tasks" something which is often said of Ethiopian students, is reckoned by teachers as a common denominator among Ethiopian students. I believe that it is highly exaggerated. As noted in the preceding pages and in Berhanu (2001), the Israeli teachers did not take into account the Ethiopian culture nor did they consider elements of cultural production and social reproduction in the school system where a "critical approach" (both to school work and also in day to day lives) is less emphasised and humility, alterity, 'softness' and 'politeness' are stressed. However, even when they are successful in school, Ethiopian students find that they may be down levered by teachers' appraisals. Intellectualism is reduced to feats of memory for instance. Many teachers have commented on the Ethiopian students' remarkable feats in memorisation. An English teacher commented:

These students remember very well, they absorb what you present to them. But, they lack critical learning strategies and approach. They have also difficulties in grasping instructions (he is referring to the 20 olim students he has been teaching the past two years). I need to give them several examples on how to proceed with the task. I usually use different modalities to explain such as pictorial, visual and oral. As to other behaviour of the Ethiopian learner, they are characterised by simple mindedness. There are elements of naivety in their behavioural repertoire. They do not doubt the teacher... The Israeli students value uniqueness and individuality. The culture here is that parents inculcate in their children these characteristics strongly and also provide optimal

conditions for the development of unique personal identity and self expression. (Yael)

This element of the dominant culture's ideological position is refracted downwards and taken on board by the subordinate group, a principle which has been expressed many times before in various forms by the likes of Poulantzas (1974), Althusser (1971), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Dale (1981) with regards to class ideology; and Mac An Ghail (1988) and Spivak (1990) regarding racialized ideologies. In my own data this can be seen in terms of the ways even some educated Ethiopians reflect similar views to those of the dominant culture:

... In Israel the nature of education and assessment are not based on multiple choices. The education is geared to broadening critical thinking skills. Our cognitive strength is that we have photographic memory of events, instant retention of what we see, and we are good at adaptation but the problem is that we lack critical analysis and conceptual development which the Israeli school system emphasise. It is not a cognition problem; it is rather an orientation problem. The curriculum here is very different from what we are used to in Ethiopia. And, it is true that the nature of the school system in which one is primarily shaped affects/determines his/her later learning styles. (Yonathan)

During my stay in Israel, I read in detail the general curriculum (1st to 12th grade) and many lesson plans, and nowhere did I come across a curriculum that incorporated and reflected the collective presence and perspective of diverse cultures and groups in relation to learning styles, ideas and 'cognitive orientation'. Here we clearly see lack of "meta cognition" and "meta emotion" – seeing things from others' view points, which are fundamental to the concept of MLE (Mediated Learning Experiences) and the Instrumental Enrichment Programme (see Skuy, 1997, for the theoretical discussion). There are a number of ways that teachers can be active in the intercultural mediation. Teachers can, for example, respect the ethnic background of their students and demonstrate that respect by reading stories with varied ethnic and racial content having students study world events from different cultural perspectives in social studies class and so on. However, multicultural education is not only content alone. A teacher's attitude toward culturally diverse students and how she or he communicates that attitude is extremely important (Mac An Ghail, 1988; Gilborne, 1990). Unfortunately, little has been done to that effect especially with respect to Ethiopian students in Israel as we shall see later.

Anxieties, fear, 'hypersensitivity' about grades/scores, over-ambition, calmness, dignity and many other characters have been attributed to the Ethiopian learner. A classroom teacher commented:

My Ethiopian students are obsessed with marks for merit of a performance or piece of work. They take it too

personally. They are curious to see what the other student obtained and then compare it to themselves. They can be terribly disappointed and harbour unpleasant feelings towards the teacher especially if they continue to get a few marks less than other students. Another problem is that you think they have understood all you teach them but that is not true. They are shy, they don't dare say that they haven't grasped the point. They appear to follow the lessons nervously, not in a relaxed mood.

Another teacher noted that Ethiopian students are:

... too ambitious, they take the learning process in personal terms. They are emotional. When they obtain fewer marks they blame themselves, they blame the teacher. They are very scared of failure... Israeli students are restless and uncooperative especially when the subject is not interesting to them. The Israeli students are bored and less enthusiastic. By comparison, Ethiopians are obedient, willing, and show interest anyway. They write everything said in the class whether they understand it or not. They don't go over it. How far the Ethiopian's will and desire to learn will last remains to be seen. (Mike)

An Ethiopian teacher and "cultural interpreter" who had the experience of teaching native Israelis as well as both Olim and Vatikim commented:

Ethiopian students listen to the teacher with interest and patience. If you want the Israeli students (Ferenjoch i.e., white) to follow you, you should prepare yourself a lot beforehand. You need to equip yourself with a lot of 'didactic' [as he used the term himself]. Ferenjoch have not much interest in school and are bored. I teach both groups of students. I am satisfied and pleased to teach the Ethiopian group. It is true; some Ethiopians are troublesome and difficult to deal with. If you tell an Ethiopian to leave the classroom as a form of punishment (for disturbing class, for instance) he will be deeply offended. The Israelis don't take it too personally and they don't feel hurt. The Israelis don't get bothered whether they are ranked first or second or whether they earn a few marks higher or lower. The Ethiopians take seriously every mark or score they obtain for school performance or conduct. They worry about what the points (marks) mean to the rest of their life. They ask me a lot about Bagrut (matriculation). The Israeli students don't bother about these things; they focus instead mostly on what is to be done now and tomorrow or the following days. For example, the Ethiopian students don't make adequate preparations for the next day's examination /test. But, they worry about the distant future. The Israelis are far better prepared for the next day's examination and focus on actual activities (Tamir).

One may question whether Ethiopian culture emphasizes an ethos of co-operative work when immigrant stu-

dents are competitive for grades and scores. This is a legitimate question and one answer is that the socialisation process of the schooling in Ethiopia is in particular characterised by allocation of grades and marks at every stage, to those who conform to the social order of the school. The process is both overt and hidden, and social reinforcements – praise, blame, etc. are the driving forces in the process. Compared to the Israeli school system, in Ethiopia there is great emphasis on competition imposed by the school system, despite the co-operative nature of the culture. Therefore, there is a tendency to give priority to the achievement of symbols rather than ‘real achievement’. This is also a classic condition in Western life styles and education forums according to Deleuze (1983) and it is reflected in the way in which the Ethiopian students were taught, and the manner by which they learned how to learn in their Ethiopian setting. The framing rules of this aspect of socialisation are different in the Israeli system. The most common variant (of learning style) in Israel is the emphasis on skill transfer to out-of-context situations. In Ethiopia rote learning and drilling tasks were typical of the educational system including religious studies (Kozulin, 1998; Levine, 1965). It was often the case that students did not fully grasp the concepts or techniques presented to them throughout their training. These early experiences or learning styles can not easily be ‘unlearned’. Here is where the need for heightened awareness and understanding on the part of teachers is highly felt and the potential for intercultural mediation is ample.

Teachers’ expectations and educational progress

Regarding educational progress of Ethiopian students, a number of problems have been raised by teachers, students themselves and advocacy groups. On the one hand, advocacy groups and some teachers attribute the problem mainly to the system while on the other hand, many teachers and school authorities adopt a ‘blaming the victim’ strategy. According to the Head of the Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ), an advocacy group which is currently engaged in promoting educational integration among Ethiopian Jews:

The two main problems that cripple our students are, firstly, teachers’ low expectations; secondly, the home-school interaction is scant in amount. Of course, there are other problems that beset the group such as lack of formal education, the oral tradition we had throughout our history in socialising our children, ‘reading together’ habits, less inquisitive or an uncritical approach to what our fathers teach us, respect for authorities and traditional wisdom and many other things which are not compatible with the Israeli socialisation process and in particular the teaching and learning styles. (Uri)

The lack of sufficient formal educational background stands out very clearly. The 18 students at the boys’ board-

ing school missed on average four to five years of education commensurate with their age. For instance, a 15 year old boy who had only 3 years of formal primary education would be assigned in Israel in 9th grade, skipping five or six years of basic education. This ‘age parallel class’ deployment (system) worries most of the students. These students would have preferred to start from where they stopped while in Ethiopia, although that means studying with children who are five or 6 years younger. A student commented bitterly:

I don’t like this age parallel class system. I want to study year by year completing each grade properly. I don’t even mind repeating grades. But here in Israel they push us forward to higher grades for which we are not prepared. What on earth can compensate for those several grades which we did not go through? When I think about it, it galls me. That is why many of us are frustrated and sometimes consider ‘dropping out’.

A similar view was expressed by a veteran Ethiopian who was engaged in post graduate studies at Hebrew University:

One of the major causes for failure and high drop out rates among Ethiopian students, apart from the dearth of ‘background education’, is this so called age parallel class learning that is the norm here. Our students are frustrated. Moreover, they do not know Hebrew well enough to follow lessons. Some people unjustly compare them with Russian immigrants and complain that Ethiopians are not progressing well. The Russians had a higher level of education before migration. They were highly acquainted with signs and symbols, and strategic learning and the habit of academic studies in their own language. So, it is not very difficult for them to transfer the skills and adapt to the Israeli school system. Another problem has to do with the teachers’ belief that these students had better concentrate on vocational tracks... (Rivka).

From my observation and informal interviews with Israeli teachers, I was able to confirm the above statements, made by the two veterans (Ethiopian origin). This applies in particular with respect to teachers’ low expectations. My general impression is that teachers are sympathetic towards Ethiopian students and like the students’ manner and discipline. Some teachers even said that they really enjoy teaching Ethiopians. However, as is visible in previous extracts, these teachers’ low expectations and doubt about the group’s success in further academic studies can often be detected in their implicit statements. The Head of a department in one boarding school, with heavy responsibilities to prepare an Ethiopian group for matriculation (Bagrut) said:

Girma, what is bothering me about Ethiopians is that they have potential which can be used in a number of other areas. Take for instance athletics. As we all know Ethiopians are world class runners especially in marath-

ons. Take another potential area. Ethiopian girls are beautiful. They could be world class models. There are several potential areas where Ethiopians may excel, such as art and music... (Asher)

“Either-or-ism”, categorisation and pedagogic discourse/symbolic control

Beyond this low expectation of teachers, what struck me most is the style of expression used to label the Ethiopian learner by Israeli teachers and even educated Ethiopians. As if all things are clear there is a strong tendency to use categorical terms to describe the Ethiopian learner. This ‘either-or-ism’ which uses binary opposition as a way of classifying people forces people to deny that there is a middle ground. It is not unjust to cite here Derrida’s (1976) famous statement “Language is not innocent” (see also Lather, 1991, 1993, 1994).

The categories (pedagogical terms) or ‘pair forming thinking’ applied most often to compare the Ethiopian students vis-à-vis (other) Israeli students are: concrete vs. abstract, memorisation vs. understanding, passive learning vs. critical/analytical learning, naturalness vs. ‘spoiled’ approach, emotional vs. rational, immature (naive) vs. mature, reticent vs. open / verbal, conformist vs. uncomformist, co-operative vs. uncooperative, calm vs. restless, vocational vs. academic, ‘sharing’ vs. individuation, ordinary vs. uniqueness, maladaptive vs. adaptive, collaborative vs. competitive, oral vs. written, informal vs. formal, peasant vs. urbanite (modern), dependent vs. independent. These and many other polarising terms were uttered to compare the Ethiopian learner with native Israelis. The terms hide the complexities of the learning processes. The characterisation of a learner in an ‘either-or manner’ conceals the fact that no one can actually be categorised as having only one aspect of the characterisation in pure form along such an imagined continuum. A student who has some difficulties to understand abstract concepts doesn’t necessarily lack “abstraction capacity”. I believe the ‘abstraction work’ is always there but perhaps manifested differently from what we accept as standard. (cf. Lévi-Strauss; see also Cole and Means, 1981; Scribner, 1984, 1997; Cole and Scribner, 1974; Axel, 1997). Perhaps, the experience of the learner in manipulating linguistic terms may be limited.

There is another dimension to this language games or play. Through this form of pedagogic communication and discourse, power is being exercised. In his book *Symbolic control and power relay*, Beach (1997) discussed the forms of symbolic control and power relay played out in education fields, and the communicative process that triangulate power, knowledge and discourse (see also Foucault, 1972, 1991; Tesfahuney, 1998; Hansen, 2000). Beach pointed out that... basically power relay in education relates to the ways different forms for the organisation of pedagogic communication (e.g. classi-

fication and framing) are differently capable of relaying power into discourse and transforming discourse into power relations and dominations because of resonances with social and material arrangements outside themselves. This occurs because education fields (settings and arenas) are not neutral media... (1997, p. 9)

In a related discussion of classification and the ubiquity of standards as invisible mediators of action, Bowker and Star (2000) pointed out how classification impinges in a myriad ways on our daily lives and how frequently invisible, highly political and ethically charged they are:

Classifications are powerful technologies embedded in working infrastructures. They become relatively invisible without losing any of that power. Classification should be recognised as the significant site of political and ethical work that they are. They should in, a word, be reclassified as key sites of work power and technology. (p. 147).

In connection with these ‘linguistic practices’ or ‘invisible structures’, Foucault (1972, 1974, 1991) used the term discourse in his analytic framework of various social institutions (factory, school, prison, mental hospital). He analysed not only how these institutions are subject to discourse but also how they control the access of individuals to various kinds of discourses (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Foucault (1974) argued that discourses are not just linguistic practices:

Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationship; they constitute both subjectivity and power relations. Discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak... Discourses are not about objects; they don’t identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention. (Ball, 1990).

One area of insensitivity to or ignorance of the Ethiopian culture was revealed by teachers repeated comments about Ethiopian students’ lack of self initiated or independent engagement in tasks without teachers close supervision, step by step order and encouragement. As an Ethiopian, I know very well how this trait evolved in the children’s behavioural repertoire. Also, my observation data in Israel among Ethiopian parents supports my own personal knowledge that this so-called “lack of independent engagement” is a carry over from home. It is not that these students can’t accomplish tasks on their own. It is more the case that in their primary socialisation, they have been told to wait for the adult’s guidance and have been strictly trained to wait for adults’ physical or verbal orders and directions. “Authoritarian” child rearing practices coupled with the allegedly ‘deeply secretive nature of the Amhara (high landers) culture’ not only stifle and restrain independent self-expression and the ability to initiate learning without an adult, but also create among many of us Ethiopians, a sense of ambiguity and equivocation. The situation gets complica-

ted, especially in intercultural interaction as most children lack a sense of direction in Israel. Here, the virtue of intercultural communication skills and thus the intercultural mediation (that should have been spearheaded by the Israeli school system) leaves much to be desired (cf. Samover and Porter, 2000; Cummins, 1996; Kleinfield, 1994; Bowman, 1989; Hollins et al., 1994; Dunn, 1989; Trueba, 1988; Ogbu, 1992).

Perception of race and racial discrimination

Another major element in the educational integration of Ethiopian students is the issue of colour or race. Space doesn't allow me here to go into details about how Ethiopians perceive discrimination on these bases.

I haven't come across any empirical study that links Ethiopians' school progress and their conception of discrimination on the basis of colour. What I can say here based on my work in Israel with Ethiopians and personal experience in Europe and in USA, a single encounter of discrimination on the basis of colour can leave an Ethiopian person with 'irreparable' damage. It is not so easy to find easy explanation for this. I don't even know myself why I feel extremely offended let alone racial discrimination by tones of voice and lack of respect in intercultural communication.

Ethiopian students in Israel have difficulties to express issues related to their colour or race. Most of the students I worked with were at pains to talk about the issue. They just couldn't find words to express their feelings and it takes them a long while before the words come out. Even these reticently uttered words are either vague or hard to make sense out of it. Wagaw's (1993) and other far sighted Western writers comments about issues of this nature not only in Israel but also in Europe and USA, where Ethiopians live as a minority in white dominated societies, partly explain the problem. Their argument has been interpreted by Wagaw (1993) as arising from the fact that:

Ethiopians in general and those in the highlands in particular, have been spared the humiliating experiences other Africans were subjected to during the period of European colonialism. Hence, it is possible that when confronted with the issue outside their land of origin, either they fail to be sensitive enough to notice it or they are unwilling to admit racial discrimination.

Whatever the main source of Ethiopian reaction (or conception) towards racially motivated incidents or perception of it may be, this is a very sensitive and crucial area which tests the ingenuity of the Israeli school authorities' and teachers' as one principal component of the intercultural mediation jigsaw puzzle. There is no question that this issue has a strong impact on the student's learning progress. If the issue is not 'mediated' in time in a two way fashion (towards both the so called 'mediating culture' and 'mediated culture') the conseque-

nces might be deleterious to role taken in society by the Ethiopian community with alienation and marginalisation as real and troubling social phenomena. According to my observations, there are tangible signs of such 'social malaise' already.

Signs and symbols

Lastly, a point that should not be undermined is the issue of signs and symbols. Ethiopians are not only learning a new script (alphabet) that must be read from right to left (unlike the Amharic way) but they also have to adjust to a number of new signs and symbols, especially in Maths. This problem came in to my attention during my observation of group tests administrated by ICELP. This testing method –Learning Potential Assessment Device – is used to identify the learning potential of students who are considered to be underachievers, learning disabled or slow performers due to their cultural difference. In many of these group tests (which are administered to assess Ethiopian students), especially in basic Maths tests (or numerical progression group test), I noted them struggling to comprehend the mathematical signs. The plus, division, and multiplication signs used in Israel are completely different from those used by students who went through the Ethiopian educational system.

Problems of assessment

In assessing an Ethiopian student, a number of other variables should be taken into account, such as clarity of instruction and attitudes towards testing; such as anxiety and fear. Testing and examinations among Ethiopians were observed to create an atmosphere of extreme uneasiness and nervousness. Schools in Ethiopia, as in many other countries, use exams at various check points, to track or stream students and to ensure that they are achieving at a grade level. However, the purpose of examinations in Ethiopia is not only designed to ascertain student achievement but also to deliberately weed-out a certain number of students, since there is no room at a higher level to accommodate all students. This condition has been known previously also in Western education systems (Baudelot and Establet, 1971) and has created tension, frustration and competitiveness instead of cooperativeness, where defeating others is, therefore more important for progress within the system than doing a task well. Most children learn to play the multiple-choice type of memorising non-thinking games enough to gain a passing grade. Israeli school system and testing agencies should take into account this non-intellective aspect which haunts these students as a vestige from their childhood school experience. Neglecting these background experiences can cause more failure not only in the testing performance but also in their overall attitude towards academic work. Here also the intercultural mediation activities leave much to be desired.

To recapitulate the analysis in this section centred on the extent the two distinct cultures, the so called main stream and the Ethiopian culture, are bumping up against one another, forming an invisible wall that stands in the way of learning, communication and social integration. The data also shows to what extent cultural differences may result in differences in learning styles that affect student/teacher relationships as well as the relationships among students in the educational environment. We have seen teachers' biases, biases in instruction materials and classroom culture, as to a great extent an extension of mainstream Western oriented Israeli culture. We have also seen that there is very little effort on the part of the Israeli school to learn about the differing cultural background of Ethiopian students in a manner to accommodate their needs and create a constructive and enriching learning environment. This lack of understanding of the perspective of the other has created a fertile ground for categorical thinking, low expectations and misinterpretation. All of these things are recognised in my study results.

Research lends support to the conclusion that different learning styles, which have unmistakably a cultural dimension and base, may also affect the cognitive outcome or school performances. As Dunn et al., (1989) indicated, no learning style is better or worse than another. In fact, all learning styles are found within all ethnic groups to a varying degree but with a dominant style for each ethnicity (Hollins, King, and Hayman, 1994). What is important, however, is the fact that the closer the match between a student's style and the teacher's, the higher the student's grade point average (Becker, 1952, 1985; see also Ogbu, 1982, 1992). When students are permitted to learn difficult academic information or skills through their identified learning style preferences, they tend to achieve statistically higher test and aptitude scores than when instruction is dissonant with their preferences (Kleinfeld, 1994, Bowman, 1989).

Another important level of analysis directs our attention to the workings of school in general. That is related to social structure and processes. We should not lose sight of the fact that schools, as part of the larger societal system, can be geared to duplicating the inequality that exists at macro level (Bowles, 1971). School systems are surrounded by pressures from ideological groups, political systems, economic conditions and other trends in society. Schools can not ignore the political, economic, cultural and ideological spheres that make up their environments (Apple, 1982; Beach, 1995, 1997).

Many studies, including my own, have shown that children from privileged classes often succeed in the educational race whereas disadvantaged and deprived children are outpaced (Bernstein, 1975). This bias in educational processes, which is working in favour of the already advantaged, has been documented by research from within the conflict perspective, especially from the Marxist oriented sociologists. The conflict theoretical per-

spective, which is one of the dominant perspectives in the field of sociology as an analytic framework to understand social structure and process, views schools as agencies which reinforce inequality, because they are controlled by powerful elites, whose interests are served and whose children benefit most. So, according to this perspective, schools are part of a larger universe of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relationships (Beach, 1995, 1997; Bowles and Ginitis, 1976; Harker et al., 1990). The French sociologist and critical theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1974), also argues that schools perpetuate inequalities at different levels. One of the more obvious of the cultural inequalities is the complex and academic variant of language embodied in educational practice which is treated by teachers as natural to the gifted, and is used to rationalise academic judgements "which in fact perpetuated cultural privilege" (Pierre 1974) since language has its origins in the social milieu (Harker, et al., 1990). Children from higher social class backgrounds (or even mainstream students) acquire these types of cultural resources (i.e. dispositions, behaviour, habits, good taste, attitude) at home and enter the educational system already familiar with the dominant culture. This helps background inequalities to become converted into differential academic attainment. The current situation of the Ethiopian students and the group-based inequalities in cognitive outcomes is partly explained by the workings of these deeply rooted processes. In this way 'intercultural mediation' mirrors a general/societal trend (David, 1981). The educational implication of the socio-cultural/historical approach and the social theory of learning model within which my study is anchored have far reaching applications to various minority groups including the Ethiopian Jews. This can be expressed as follows:

While cultural groups may exhibit differences in cognition, these differences are related to specific experiences embedded in specific sociocultural and historical contexts, not to deficits in underlying biological capabilities. More over, it suggests that there is considerable diversity within cultural groups, which reflects the diversity of experiences and meanings within groups. (Jacob, 1996).

In relation to special education, being an Ethiopian Jew in the mainstream can in many respects be understood as just one aspect of being in a minority, with differences which are judged by the majority as problematic, deviant and of less value, and as subjects labelled as "exceptional", "deprived" or deviant and in need of special compensatory education measures. In several senses this "likens" them to other groups such as varieties of so called handicapped groups (Lahdenperä, 1997; Emanuelsson, 1998, 2001, 2003; Emanuelsson et al., 2001; Dyson and Millward, 2000; Persson, 1998, 2003; Westling, 2003; Thomas and Loxley, 2000; Losen and Orfield, 2002). From this point of view my study and the implications suggested have a broader applicability, and

one may draw general conclusions by comparison to other similar situations in Israel and beyond.

Until now Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) programme/model (Feuerstein, 1980) is primarily used at an individual level to help individual learners develop thinking skills and strategies to enhance cognitive modifiability and become autonomous learners. I think it is feasible to use FIE at a system level. Intercultural mediation can be facilitated through the application of the twelve identified parameters of MLE across cultures (Skuy, 1997), with the aim of building a pluralistic (multi-cultural) society that takes into account diverse values, behavioural norms, beliefs, linguistic expressions, patterns of thinking, styles of learning, and interpersonal and intra-personal communication in general, and in educational settings in particular. Systems at different societal levels, such as for instance the institution of school, may apply the cognitive, emotional and cultural concepts incorporated in the construct of MLE to issues facing our communities on a day to day basis. Such an approach can be a major step forward to enhance learning and avoid 'educational wastage' and cultural domination that currently beset the Ethiopian community. In connection with this issue Emerson (1991) pointed out:

Feuerstein's theories open many possibilities... not only for rendering an individual cognitively modifiable but also for using the materials to combine cultural activities and teaching strategies as a means to stimulate learning which should relate to the native students' particular cultural background and experience. The acquisition of cultural knowledge can be equated with content, or product instruction while cognition can be equated with process orientation in thinking. The two concepts are interchangeable and interdependable. (p.142).

The problem of inter-cultural mediation, however, can not be fully resolved through isolated programmes confined to school settings. The issue of academic success and group-based differences in scholastic field is firmly tied to other dimensions of societal functioning as well (Whitty, 1985). A part of it has been briefly discussed in this summary in relation to social structure and processes.

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