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TESFA Program – Integration of Teachers of Ethiopian Descent into the Israeli Education System

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Hagit Mishkin, the head of the TESFA program in the years 2018–2023, who was brutally murdered by Hamas terrorists who invaded Israel on 7.10.23.

ABSTRACT: Jews from across the globe have flocked to Israel over the past century. The immigration of Ethiopian Jews took place in two main waves: the first in 1984 and the second in 1991, and as of 2022, this community numbers about 168,000 (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The ingathering of Jews of Ethiopian descent to Israel is a unique phenomenon. The Ethiopian Jewish minority in Israel is characterized by minority group features, and is distinguished from Israeli society in appearance, culture, and language. In an effort to increase the integration of Ethiopian Jews into mainstream Israeli society, the Israeli government has decided to harness the educational system as a socializing agent. The education system plays a key role in shaping a multicultural society, since it serves as a meeting place between different groups (Arifin & Susanto, 2017). Increasing the representation of Ethiopian Jewish teachers in this system not only gives them a respectable occupation and source of living, but also increases Israeli students' exposure to these teachers as positive role models, a move which help combat racist attitudes and create a better future for all. The TESFA program aims to design culturally and racially sensitive solutions that help improve the integration of teachers of Ethiopian descent into the Israeli educational system.

KEY WORDS: Teachers of minority group, integration, support system, Ethiopian Jews.

Introduction

TESFA (Hope in Amharic) is a holistic program for the quantitative and qualitative integration of teachers of Ethiopian-descent in the education system that promotes a multicultural-approach. The program has been in operation in teacher- training institutes for the past 15 years and is run by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the MOFET Institute, in conjunction with the Merhavim Institute. The program's three main fields are:

1. Developing academic learning skills and acquisition of pedagogic tools for teaching in the education system;
2. enhancing the student's personal skills;
3. acquisition of educational tools for coping with being the social "other" in Israeli society by promoting tolerance for multiculturalism and respect for all people (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2015). The program coordinators collaborate with faculty in the teacher- training institutes to promote and implement these goals through multicultural courses, informal activities, conferences and personal mentoring.

This paper describes how The TESFA program strives to achieve each of these three goals and explains the relevance The TESFA program 's model to teacher educators' professional roles and status worldwide.

The Jews in Ethiopia

Through the years, the Jews in Ethiopia did not see themselves as local inhabitants but rather as foreigners who had emigrated from their land, from Jerusalem, to which they would return one day. They called themselves "Beta Israel", the house of Israel, and their prayers were filled with yearnings and supplications to the Creator, asking Him to help them return to the Land of Israel. They lived in isolation and loneliness, confronting missionary activities and forced conversion to Christianity, suffering from antisemitism, and always feeling like strangers (Anteby-Yemini, 2004; Baratz & Kalnisky, 2017).

Until the 20th Century, Ethiopian Jews were completely isolated from Jewish communities in other parts of the world. Yet, they adhered to Biblical Judaism and preserved their identity. As a result of this isolation, the Ethiopian Jewish practices diverge today in many ways from traditional Judaism, resulting in their difficulty to gain recognition as Jews by mainstream Judaism (Sharaby, 2022).

Immigration to Israel

Until the late 1970s, Ethiopian Jews were denied the right to enter Israel as Jewish immigrants under the “Law of Return”. Israeli government authorities cited questions regarding their Jewishness, was concerned with the need to preserve strong ties with Ethiopia and with the huge economic-cultural gap between rural Ethiopia and urban Israeli society. This attitude changed in 1973, when Israel’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef officially declared “Beta Israel” bona fide members of the Jewish community and thus eligible to return to Israel as citizens under the Law of Return (Goldberg & Kirschenbaum, 1989).

The Israeli government and the Jewish Agency, a parastatal governmental organization in charge of immigration, attempted to have the community brought to Israel but met with opposition from the Ethiopian government, which had placed a general ban on the emigration of its citizens. The Jews did not give up on their dream to return home to Israel and undertook a perilous voyage which included whole families being smuggled over the border and trekking on foot for weeks through hostile Sudanese terrain in order to meet Israeli Mossad representatives who would help them make their way to Israel. Many Jews perished on these dangerous journeys and during the long stays in refugee camps in the Sudan while waiting for conditions that would allow them to complete their journey to Israel (Gilad & Millet, 2016). A few Jewish Ethiopians managed to make it to Israel, but massive airlifts from refugee camps in the Sudan did not begin until the late 1970s. Most of the Ethiopian Jews have arrived in Israel in immigration operations such as ‘Operation Moses’, ‘Operation Queen of Sheba’ and ‘Operation Solomon’ (Roman, 2011).

Operation Moses in 1984 brought 8,000 Jews to Israel, and by this time immigration was in full swing. But the flights were abruptly halted when the press made the secret operation public, thus forcing the Sudanese government, which is allied with Arab nations, to stop the airlifts. The airlifts did not resume again until the fall of the military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991 (Mesfin, 2004). In addition, the U.S. government promised a peaceful settlement of the conflict with rebel forces in Ethiopia if the Jews were released (Bishku, 2015).

Perhaps the most dramatic rescue was “Operation Solomon”, which took place in May 1991. Assisted by Israeli soldiers in plain clothing, the staff of the Jewish Agency, the Mossad, and other voluntary groups, the Ethiopian Jews were flown out of Ethiopia without even a day’s notice to Tel Aviv, Israel.

Seats were removed from the airplanes used for this operation, so that as many passengers as possible could be carried in each airplane. This operation airlifted more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv in less than 36 hours (Kaplan, 2005).

Integration into Israeli Society

When the new immigrants arrived in Israel, they were welcomed by the government and granted their basic needs for accommodation, healthcare, education, and general welfare. Integration into Israeli society, however, proved to be a more complex challenge, since the government did not really understand the community's specific needs, and therefore was not able to address them.

The Ethiopian immigrants experienced a sudden and complete transition from an Ethiopian rural, agricultural culture to a modern, Western, industrialized society and were compelled to cope with many unexpected changes. For instance, Ethiopian Jews were surprised to find that there were White Jews with different traditions, as they believed themselves to be the only Jewish people in the world (Kaplan & Rosen, 2017; Schwarz, 2016). Differences in cultural mannerisms made things even more challenging. For example, a well brought up Ethiopian Jew would never express negative emotions, make a request, or ask a question of a superior, traits which are imperative for conveying one's needs (Baratz & Kalnisky, 2017). In addition, low levels of formal education and literacy, lack of job skills suitable for an industrialized workforce, cultural disparities, and lack of Hebrew language skills made it very difficult to integrate into the work force (Kass & Reingold, 2013).

Integration into Israeli society was difficult because of skin color differences, doubts about the authenticity of the immigrants' Jewishness, broad cultural differences, and their concentration in poor neighborhoods. Ethiopian immigrants became stigmatized as a "different" (Jordan, 2016). These difficulties resulted in psychological stress, family crises, and a sense of disappointment and affront (Walsh & Tuval-Mashiach, 2012). Their consciousness of difference from the rest of Israeli society was expressed in oppositional attitudes toward figures of authority, and avoidance from taking initiative. Helplessness, confusion, misunderstanding, a sense of a lack of control, and the weakening of mutual familial support were other expressions of the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation (Baratz, L., & Kalnisky, 2017). These frustrations translated into persistently low levels of employment and income, lack of representation in the government, poor quality of life and health, and for some, a feeling of alienation from mainstream Israeli society (Palmor, 2016).

The government tried to remedy these setbacks. At the time of each major wave of immigration, the Israeli government attempted to facilitate the integration of Ethiopian immigrants through a “master plan” covering issues such as housing, education, employment, and community organization. These plans often produced relatively disappointing results (Semyonov et al., 2015)

The Jewish Ethiopian Community in Israel Today

At the end of 2022 Jews of Ethiopian descent in Israel numbered 168,800 residents. Approximately 92,100 were born in Ethiopia and 76,800 were born in Israel (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Second-generation Ethiopian Jews who were raised in Israel have fared considerably better than their parents and have become far more integrated in nearly all aspects of mainstream society, including: education, employment, military service, and politics. However, significant gaps in achievement remain as compared to other segments of the Israeli public (Kass & Reingold, 2013; Semyonov et al., 2015).

Although official policies prohibit discrimination, citizens of Ethiopian-descent are over-represented in the lowest socioeconomic strata and report that they often confront implicit or explicit expressions of racism (Abu 2017; Semyonov et al., 2015).

In 2017, the government established a special unit in the Ministry of Justice to coordinate the fight against racism. The unit’s goals are to act to prevent racism based on skin color, origin or belonging to a minority group, with the understanding that the definition of racism does not include only extreme and explicit expressions, such as physical and verbal violence, but refers also to patterns of implicit discrimination and exclusion, microaggressions and distribution of power according to affiliation group. (Palmor, 2016). Operative conclusions included government initiatives that would increase representation of Jews of Ethiopian descent in the media, the academia, and in higher income workplaces in order to change the “backward” stigma which had clung to the group.

Students of Ethiopian Descent in High Education Institutes

Among students of Ethiopian descent in secondary education, 49.2% are enrolled in the technological/vocational track, compared to 34.7% of their non-Ethiopian counterparts in Hebrew-language education (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Only about one-third of Ethiopian high school

students last year scored high enough on matriculation exams to be eligible for university, as compared to two-thirds of overall Jewish students.

Mass protests by this community in recent years have called for increased awareness regarding built in discriminatory attitudes and practices which are based on skin color, that exist in the educational system. (Abu, 2017; Avraham & Mishkin, 2023). Awareness and efforts to remedy the situation are starting to pay off. The number of students of Ethiopian origin studying at institutions of higher education has been increasing in recent years: from 3,194 in 2016/17 to 3,985 in 2022/23, an increase of 24.8%.

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics In 2022/23, 4,600 students of Ethiopian descent studied for a degree. 84.4% (3,364) studied towards a first degree (BA), 13.7% (545) studied towards a second degree (MA), and 0.5% (20) studied towards a third degree (PhD).

Teachers of Ethiopian-descent in Israel

The educational system plays a key role in shaping a multicultural society, since it serves as a meeting place between different groups (Arifin & Susanto, 2017). Increasing this representation and thereby Israeli students' exposure to teachers of Ethiopian descent as positive role models is crucial in order to combat racist attitudes and create a better future for all, as found in studies conducted in the USA on teachers of African American descent.

Although Israelis of Ethiopian-descent account for 1.7% of students in teacher training institutes, they account for just 0.4% of the teaching force. The percentage of teachers of Ethiopian-descent who do not have fixed tenure, even after five or ten years (30% and 20% respectively) is much higher than the percentage among the general teaching population in Israel.

In recent years, several studies on the integration of teachers of Ethiopian-descent in the Israeli education-system have been conducted. The findings show that like all novice teachers, they also experienced difficulties at the start of their career. However, the most salient finding was the difficulties they faced when confronted with racist perspectives and discrimination. Krivosh (2016) conducted a study among students of Ethiopian-descent (N = 33). 30% of the participants reported difficulties in finding employment and 47% reported difficulties in their first year of teaching. Although some hardships are universal, others are unique to teachers of Ethiopian descent, such as difficulty retaining their place of employment or receiving promotions due to employment terms which differ from the norm, or being subjected to racial slurs from local authorities, school leadership, teaching colleagues and students' parents.

Tannenbaum-Domnowitz et al. (2018) researched the parameters which enable the integration of the novice teacher's cultural identity with their professional identity. This research paper included both quantitative and qualitative components (77 Israeli teachers of Ethiopian descent and a comparison group of 78 teachers who were not of Ethiopian descent). Overall, only marginal differences were noted between the two groups in categories of overall satisfaction (70%), and feelings of affiliation with the school (60%). Between 54%-71% felt that their school was tolerant and respectful of all the staff, and 30% of both groups indicated hearing racist comments made by students. Distinct differences between the two groups appear when it comes to racist comments from adults: 24% of teachers of Ethiopian descent were exposed to racist comments from other teachers (in contrast to 13% of the comparison group), and 28% of teachers of Ethiopian descent were exposed to racist comments from parents (compared to 20% in the comparison group). Findings from the qualitative part of the research (interviews with nine working teachers and three teachers who left the system, all of Ethiopian descent, and three school principals) show that all the interviewees had experienced racism. The racism was directed either at them or Ethiopian-Israeli students in their school, or at the Ethiopian Israeli community in general. The racism was expressed by students, parents, or staff members--other teachers, school principals, or even supervisors from the Ministry of Education. An important finding in this research is the pivotal role the principle's approach and actions have not only in supporting the teachers and encouraging integration, but also in creating a school culture which promotes tolerance.

Another study examined the perceptions of Israeli teachers and kindergarten teachers of Ethiopian descent, regarding their job-searching experience; their rates of job retention; and their experiences as employees of the Israeli education system. 13 teachers and kindergarten teachers of Ethiopian descent were interviewed, and the interviews were analyzed using a qualitative-phenomenological method. The findings point to the difficulties they faced: difficulties in finding a job and keeping it, and discrimination based on skin color and ethnic background. Interesting findings indicate that despite these difficulties, the teachers exhibited important traits which enabled them to change this reality and realize their goals and abilities, such as recognition of their value, self-efficacy, resilience, agency, and aspirations for the future. The teachers refused to be passive bystanders who transfer responsibility to an external party, or to accept the reality. In addition, a key point which enabled the teachers to persevere in their quest, was a strong support system: either family based, teaching collage based, school based, or other systems such as TESFA (Avraham & Mishkin, 2023).

The TESFA Program

In light of data showing the under-representation of teachers of Ethiopian descent in the education system, the MOE defined their integration as a key goal and is working on several fronts to implement this goal. Creating a working partnership between educators, policymakers and researchers the Israeli MOE initiated the TESFA (“Hope” in Amharic) program. This is a holistic program dedicated to the quantitative and qualitative integration of teachers of Ethiopian descent into the education system while promoting a multicultural and accepting culture in schools. The term “quantitative” refers to increasing the number of teachers of Ethiopian descent who teach on all levels of the educational system, and the term “qualitative” refers to the aspiration that the teachers take on meaningful positions of leadership within the school (including senior positions within the education system), and act as multicultural promoting agents. A steering committee consisting of all the partners in the program, educators, policymakers, and researchers, convenes every three months to discuss TESFA’s future activities. It is an example of a successful case of collaboration between Policymakers and researchers who need to meet frequently to exchange knowledge, ideas, and concerns.

The program was established by Prof. Orna Schatz-Oppenheimer and has been in operation in teacher training institutes for the past 15 years, with over 600 student teachers participating every year between 2017–2021. The students learn in the regular teachers programs but have an additional support system which promotes the acquisition of three main skills: 1. Developing academic learning skills and learning pedagogic tools for teaching in the educational system; 2. Developing students’ personal skills and educational leadership; 3. Acquisition of education tools for coping with being the social “other” in Israeli society by promoting tolerance for multiculturalism and respect for all people (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2015). Emphasis is also placed on cultural empowerment and self-pride, encouraging the students to become familiar with and value their own cultural traditions (Cintrón, 2022).

An additional aspect of TESFA are financial aid packages made available to students. Student teachers of Ethiopian descent studying in institutions of higher education are eligible for financial aid which will enable them to commit to a four-year program of study, and likewise, academic institutes that recruit teachers of Ethiopian descent are eligible for receipt of grants and TESFA mentoring to help them create programs and workshops that will gradually enhance these teachers’ sense of autonomy, well-being, and motivation. These

programs aim to lead to a high sense of self-efficacy, as early as possible in the teacher education and training stage.

With the help of their trainees, teaching colleges and TESFA reach out to kindergartens and schools encouraging them to incorporate into their syllabus programs and learning focused on Ethiopian Jewish culture. These programs are conducted by the teachers in training without regard to the teachers' origin, thereby relaying the message that the culture being taught belongs to the Jewish people as a whole, not only to Ethiopian Jews (Avraham & Mishkin, submitted). This initiative reflects the budding shift in Israeli society from a "melting pot" ideology to a multi-cultural society, that values the cultural elements brought by each segment of society, and encourages mutual learning between the different immigrant groups (Maharat et al., 2018).

During the first years the program was tailored to meet the specific needs of student of Ethiopian descent and address the gaps it was felt they must bridge in order to integrate successfully into the teaching profession. During the years changes were made and all the support systems became voluntary, available upon the request of the students and the teachers, in order to prevent stigmatizations of the participants as needy or lacking (Unger, 2015). This change was made, trusting that those in need would turn for help, and those who didn't, were managing on their own. These changes helped to make the program less stigmatized, and participant satisfaction increased (Ran, 2017).

As a result of these efforts, the number of teachers of Ethiopian descent entering and persevering in the education system has more than doubled in the last decade.

Teachers of Ethiopian descent who participated in the TESFA program described the program as a significant source of support having a positive impact on their absorption into the educational system, as well as giving them tools for confronting racism, thereby influencing positively on their decision to remain in the teaching profession.

Alamito, a teacher with a two-year tenure shares her understanding of the significance professional support and encouragement have on a new teachers' coping abilities:

TESFA taught me how to believe in myself, to recognize my abilities [...] okay, so sometimes a hurdle stands in your way. The message I received was: "Go ahead, prove yourself!" My coordinator kept telling me: "I understand your difficulty, but you are a good teacher. You will be noticed. Someone will see how good you are with the children, how you respond to them". I trusted her advice and did not give up.

In our conversations she gave me tools to help me counter the challenges I was encountering, and when I told her about my work, she demonstrated to me what a good teacher I am [...] Rabbi Karlibach used to say that all a child really needs is one person who believes in him. For me, my coordinator was that person.

Bat-El, an intern, explains the significance of the pedagogic mentoring she received from TESFA during her year of internship:

Look, I can tell you that the pedagogic theory I learnt in my teacher's college was very enriching. But when it comes to actually standing before parents and dealing with fellow staff etc', those are things that you can only learn hands on, when you are actually teaching. But then, you are already out of teaching collage and do not have with whom to consult...

I was lucky. I had a very good relationship with my TESFA coordinator in college. So when I called her, she immediately understood [my difficulty] and told me that I was not the only one to experience this difficulty, that other girls went through the same thing [...] that this is just an initial response [...] that it is unfortunate, but sometimes things work out this way [...] I almost wanted to say "natural"... Even though it should not be natural. But it is difficult to change people, it needs to be a process. And she taught me how to cope, and also suggested that I join a few meetings with a parent's counselor. When I went, I met other new immigrants there, and it was really good, because it gave me tools for life.

Etanesh, an intern, reflects on the importance of TASFA mentorship during the first years of teaching, mentorship which also addressed the wider aspects of joining the work force:

TESFA understands our needs when we go out into the work force. Our young men and women [teachers of Ethiopian descent] need a lot of support and guidance to teach us how to deal with new situations: How to open a pension plan or an advanced study fund. Don't forget that our parents can't give us any advice on these topics, they are not familiar with these concepts.

I think that TESFA understands that you can't just "throw us into the water" and expect us to swim. It isn't so easy to cope on your own. When you have a mentor who understands you, it is easy to go and ask for help. Bureaucracy can be scary, but it is good to know that even if things are confusing, you are not alone, and there is someone there who will not give up on you.

Conclusion

TESFA is a program that aims to optimize the integration and stability of teachers of a minority group within the Israeli educational system. It is

an example of a successful collaboration between educators, researchers and policymakers who meet frequently to navigate the program in accordance with shifting needs. TESFA provides both student-teachers and novice teachers with support and skills necessary for their successful integration into the educational system, and actively promotes multiculturalism in schools. In addition, TESFA offers financial assistance and mentorship (supplying encouragement, practical information, needed skills and advice) to interested students throughout their training period and early years in the system.

Research surrounding the TESFA program contributes to our understanding of how novice teachers can be empowered to overcome the many barriers minority teachers face while trying to integrate into the system. We learn that teachers of Ethiopian descent face difficulties finding teaching positions and fully integrating into the educational system due to discriminatory employment practices, lack of promotion opportunities, failure of others to recognize their leadership skills and the potential power of their presence. Much of this discrimination is implicit.

Research shows that teachers who recognize their value, possess self-efficacy, resilience and agency, while holding on to aspirations for the future are most likely to overcome these hurdles. All these traits can be cultivated and nurtured.

Research also points to external variables which positively impact the teacher's successful integration into a school, among them are the role of the principle who supports integration and multiculturalism whilst fostering the novice teacher's self-efficacy; and an external support system which supplies needed guidance and emotional support.

Over the 15 years of TESFA's existence, the number of teachers of Ethiopian descent in the Israeli educational system has tripled (from 300 to nearly 1,000). However, there is still a way to go, since proportionally, these teachers represent only 0.4% of the total body of teachers, while the proportion of Israeli Ethiopians in the total population is 1.6%. Additionally, the employment conditions of many of these teachers remain inferior to those of their counterparts, and not enough of them are reaching higher teaching positions and tenure.

We are hopeful that additional TESFA research will offer an understanding of processes which need to be implemented in order to mitigate implicit racism in teaching colleges, schools, and in the educational system.

Knowledge gained through research conducted around TESFA can assist policy makers and educators in other countries who are aspiring to increase numbers of minority teachers. The TESFA leadership model, which ensures a close relationship between policy makers and the real needs as they emerge, ensures an educated hands-on approach which utilizes funds and

resources in the most efficient way. TESFA research has spotlighted central points of friction which hinder integration, as well as tools which encourage its success. These findings as well, may be implemented by other countries in their integration initiatives.

We encourage our colleagues in other countries who are set on creating a more tolerant and multicultural society, to create their own support systems which answer to the specific needs of their minority groups and provide them with the tools they require in order to integrate into the educational system, become role models, and enrich society.

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