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Unity Pilot Project
Engaged Learning Final Report

By

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Engaged Learning

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Introduction

This summer, as part of the Maguire Fellowship and my Engaged Learning project, I spent time in Israel volunteering with the Ethiopian National Project (ENP), a non-profit organization whose purpose is to help Ethiopian immigrants and their families succeed in Israel. The Engaged Learning Project is a grant program for capstone-level student learning beyond the classroom. The Maguire Fellowship provides the opportunity for students to engage in public service or research in the field of ethics.

ENP has many programs, but I specifically worked at one of their youth outreach centers in Kiriath Bialik. At the youth center, there were about thirty kids, aged around 12-16. Some of the youth were born in Ethiopia and some were born in Israel.

This product includes the history of the Ethiopian migration to Israel, information about my project, named Pilot Project Unity, and my final reflections.

The Migration of Jewish Ethiopians to Israel

To understand the current situation of the Ethiopian-Israelis in Israel, it is important to know how they got there. There are two main motivations for the migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel: religious, and political. The Ethiopian Jews are said to be remnants from the lost tribe of Dan¹ or descendants from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Ojanuga 147). Although their exact Jewish origin is unknown, the Ethiopian Jews' devotion to Judaism is apparent. For example, the Jewish Ethiopians kept Jewish dietary laws and passed down the teachings of the Torah ("History"). Their Ethiopian neighbors called them "*Falashas*", derived from the Ethiopian word meaning "strangers" (Bar-Yosef 233). The Ethiopian Jews referred to themselves by another name: "*Beta Israel*", meaning "House of Israel" (Elon 543). For a while the

¹ The tribe of Dan is one of the 10 tribes of Israel captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. (Ojanuga 147).

Ethiopian's Jewish authenticity was debated by the Israeli government. However, in 1973 the Beta Israel were officially recognized as Jews by the Israeli Rabinnate and were allowed to become Israeli citizens under the Law of Return² (Offer 4). Some Jewish Ethiopians might have felt they should be in the Holy Land and thus immigrated to Israel.

Unfortunately, religion was not the only motivation for Ethiopians immigrating to Israel. Political factors played one of the most important roles in the migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Under the dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, anti-Semitism was high. Jewish practices and the teaching of Hebrew were forbidden. Not only was religious persecution a huge factor, but "forced conscription at the age of 12, the constant threat of war, famine, high infant mortality rates, and bad health care" were also of reason ("History"). In 1974, the Civil War in Ethiopia began. As conditions worsened for Ethiopian Jews, "their religious devotion to Jerusalem began to be transformed into an active desire to emigrate" (Offer 121). With increasing hardships, emigrating from Ethiopia became an appealing alternative; however, the Ethiopian government had banned any of its people from emigrating.

Smuggling Jews out of Ethiopia had begun in the early 1980s; however, in 1984 Operation Moses, an initiative to rescue Jews from Ethiopia and bring them to Israel through secret airlifts, took place. The Operation was successful, bringing Jews through Sudan to Israel, until the operation was uncovered through the press. Sudan was forced to align with its Arab Nation allies and stop the airlifts (Ojanuga 148). Operation Joshua, a smaller follow-up mission, brought 500 Beta Israel to Israel. Under the dictatorship of Mengitsu Haile Mariam, Beta Israel emigration was forbidden while there were still many Ethiopian Jews and their families left behind and negotiations to rescue them "fell on deaf ears" ("History").

² The Law of Return states that the "The State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews and for the ingathering of exiles from all countries of their dispersion." ("The Law of Return").

In 1991, rebel armies pushed Mariam out of power leading him to flee from Ethiopia, and ending the Civil War. Shortly thereafter, Operation Solomon airlifted “more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv in less than 33 hours” (Ojanuga 148). Operation Solomon rescued “twice the number of Ethiopian Jews in Operation Moses and Joshua put together (“History”).

It is important to know the reasons for an immigrant group’s migration. Ethiopian-Israelis are refugees. Their refugee status affects how they might integrate into a country.

Israel

Israel is one of the youngest countries in the world, receiving its independence in 1948. It is not only one of the youngest countries, but it is also one of the smallest countries, comprising of only about 20,770 square kilometers. To put this into perspective, Israel could fit into Texas about thirty three times. Israel is a democratic and Jewish state. It is a country made up of immigrants from the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and other regions (Offer 31). It is a country that welcomes “*Olim Chadashim*”, new immigrants, but the integration of Ethiopian Jews has been more difficult than expected.

The Challenges

According to the 2012 statistics from the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute, Ethiopian-Israelis had higher dropout rates and lower matriculation rates than their Jewish counterparts (“The Ethiopian Community” 6-7). Lower education tends to lead to lower employment rates, which in turn leads to higher levels of poverty. In 2008-2009 data, the average monthly and hourly income of Ethiopian-Israelis was lower than that of the general Jewish population (“The

Ethiopian Community” 13). Also, “nearly half of Ethiopian adults age twenty-five to fifty-four are unemployed, and a majority of Ethiopian-Israelis are on government welfare” (Senor & Singer, 123). Various scholars are concerned that “the Ethiopian community will become one of the most disadvantaged and marginalized segments of Israeli society” (Offer 30). Access to education can help alleviate these issues within the Ethiopian-Israeli community. Education influences employment and poverty rates, therefore increasing education can lead to more jobs for Ethiopian-Israelis and less government dependency. Ethiopian-Israeli youth are critical to overcoming these factors. By focusing on the development of Ethiopian-Israeli youth, and providing them with academic and social skills, advancement in Israeli society is possible.

Barriers to Integration

Cultural Differences

Research shows that “the greater the similarity in labour market structure and culture between the country of origin and the country of destination, the easier the transfer of skills and knowledge, and the greater the likelihood of successful integration into the new country” (Offer 5). It is no wonder then that the differences between Ethiopia and Israel have caused greater difficulty in integration than immigrants from other countries. Transitioning from a “developing nation with a rural economy” to a “Western country with a high-tech market economy” does not come without its problems (“History”).

There is a huge cultural gap between Ethiopian culture and Israeli culture. Israel maintains a very innovative, high-tech economy, having “the highest concentration of engineers and research and development spending in the world” (Senor & Singer, 9). Not only that, but “more Israeli companies are listed on the NASDAQ exchange than all companies from the entire

European continent” (Senor & Singer, 11). With all of its innovations, it is no wonder that one of Israel’s leading exports is high-technology equipment (“Israel” *The World Fact Book*). Ethiopia, however, is still a developing country and the innovations the majority of Israelis can enjoy may only be experienced by the rich minority in Ethiopia. Agriculture is central to Ethiopia’s economy and “accounts for 46% of GDP and 85% of total employment” (“Ethiopia” *The World Fact Book*) Rather than getting attention for its technology, Ethiopia has received foreign demand for their textiles, leather, and coffee (“Ethiopia” *The World Fact Book*). Acquiring skills and finding jobs in a country that has a completely different economical focus than your native country is difficult and is one of the challenges immigrating Ethiopians are faced with.

Another difference between Ethiopia and Israel is that Ethiopia is a collectivist society and Israel has evolved into a more individualistic society. Israel has a collectivist history, apparent by organizations such as its *Kibbutzim* which are communal agricultural communities where people share the property and wealth. In the kibbutzim’s earlier days, even children lived in communal children’s houses. However, today Kibbutzim have become more individualistic with more individual choices such as housing options and educational pursuits. Most *kibbutzniks*, people who live on kibbutzim, make and enjoy their own salaries instead of salaries going directly into the Kibbutz’ ownership and then being shared evenly among its members. In an individualistic country, individuals tend to focus on the individual rather than the whole group. They pursue their own personal goals rather than group goals. In Ethiopia, emphasis is placed on the group. The group’s etiquette, norms, and values tend to align with each other. Trust is given to the group and everyone in the group looks after each other. Perhaps if Ethiopians had immigrated at an earlier time when the collectivist Kibbutz was prevalent, their assimilation might have been a little easier.

Israel is also a low-context country. Low context countries tend to have a need for order. Life is governed by laws. Business agreements can occur through written agreements even with strangers. There is high trust among Israelis because each Israeli believes others will follow the same rules they live by. This is opposite of a high-context country such as Ethiopia, in which trust must be earned before agreements and other transactions can occur. Nepotism is very common in high-context countries which make it even more difficult for Ethiopians who may be moving away from their family and friends with whom they have already built relationships with or with integrating Ethiopians into Israeli neighborhoods where they might be further away from other Ethiopians.

Israel is a very low power distance country, meaning decision making can happen on all levels of society and status is not very important. Israel is a country “with fewer class differences than most” and a big reason is this low power distance aspect (Senor & Singer, 52). One of the characteristics of Judaism is “the corresponding attitude of questioning” (Senor & Singer, 51). A phrase called *Rosh gadol*, which means “big head” in Hebrew, encourages “challeng[ing] the chief” and encompasses the short distance between Israeli citizens and Israeli authority figures (Senor & Singer, 92). Israelis also have a lot of *chutzpah*, a word similar to assertiveness which can mean “incredible guts.” *Chutzpah* is seen in the way “university students speak with their professors, employees challenge their bosses, [and] sergeants question their generals” (Senor & Singer, 30). The attitude of *chutzpah* further closes the gap between Israeli citizens and Israeli authority figures. Another way in which people in positions of power continue to stay close to home is the use of nicknames. Israelis commonly use nicknames and authority figures are no exception. Current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is known as “Bibi” (Senor & Singer, 31). All of this is opposite of the high power distance Ethiopia where decisions made by

authority are not usually questioned. Class systems are prevalent in Ethiopia and may be based upon age, wealth, gender, or ethnicity. There is a huge gap between the rich and poor and status is very hierarchal. Social interactions reflect this hierarchy. For example, religious and political figures are seen to possess more authority than teachers or other workers, and this authority is not challenged. There also seems to be a lack of trust between people in positions of power and those with less power, such as the government and its people. The youth at my center definitely had no problem talking back to their counselors, they are already learning about chutzpah. I can imagine how this might disrupt their life at home, where kids are expected to obey their elders.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) plays a huge role in Israel's low power distance culture. Army service is required for both men and women at the age of eighteen (exceptions may include Israeli Arabs and Hasidic Jews). Although duration of service may differ depending on which unit one enters, women typically serve for approximately two years while men serve for about three years. After completion, Israelis continue to serve in the army reserves for a few weeks out of the year. Although specific army units have different levels of prestige (similar to the way different universities in America have different rankings), the IDF has a lack of hierarchy which generates a lack of hierarchy in civilian life (Senor & Singer, 52). Unity is created through compulsory army service, where people share the common experience of sleeping in bare tents or going without showering for days and places Israelis on equal footing. Not only this, but the IDF unites under fighting for the "existence of their country" (Senor & Singer, 54). This equal footing diminishes the gap between those in positions of power and those who are not. In Ethiopia, army service is not compulsory and as a result, the same equal footing that Israelis experience is not seen in Ethiopian society. Ethiopians also do not possess the same assertiveness and questioning that Israelis do. Even those that voluntarily join the military would

not question generals, sergeants or others in officer positions as Israelis might do. Ethiopians must adjust from a country with voluntary army service to a country where the army is not only compulsory, but its culture also greatly emphasized even beyond the military itself.

There are national cultural differences and there are familial cultural differences. Ethiopia is a male-dominated society and elders are respected. In Israel, the youth of Ethiopian-Israeli children have adapted faster than their parents due to their young age and exposure to Israeli culture in schools and other places. Because of this, they have a better understanding than their parents of the language and cultural customs of Israel. This causes parents to rely on them, creating a role reversal where the children act as “head of households” (Kaplan & Hagar, 136).

Ethiopian women are encouraged to take a greater role in Israel than in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, women have fewer freedoms in the male dominated society. However, in Israel women are given more responsibility and autonomy than in their native country (Kaplan & Hagar, 136). Ethiopian-Israeli women now have the choice to make decisions about their education and family, for example, how far they would like to pursue their education, or the number of children they would like to have. More of them work outside of the home and they all join the Israeli army. To see women with so much independence from men would be very unusual in Ethiopian society. The loss of control males once had in Ethiopia causes them to be resentful (Kaplan & Hagar, 136). These new cultural behaviors often clash with their old ones and adjusting is difficult.

Integration Implementation

Unlike other waves of immigration from less-developed countries, Ethiopian immigrants' process has been different. Upon arrival, Ethiopian refugees are referred to absorption centers.

These centers are in place to help Ethiopians learn Hebrew and to provide health care and job training services. However, they have been criticized for fostering Ethiopian dependency on the government and isolating Ethiopians on the outskirts of town. (Kaplan & Hagar, 123).

Dependency is created through government programs which provide free Hebrew courses, and living expense stipends given to newcomers while they transition (Senor & Singer, 133). In the beginning Ethiopians were housed in “previously abandoned mobile homes on the outskirts of small towns” (Kaplan & Hagar, 123). Later on, special incentives to Ethiopian- Israelis were given to encourage them to move into other cities to help spread them out and provide better living conditions. Yet, “even within stronger communities they were often settled in undesirable neighborhoods (Kaplan & Hagar, 124). Settlement in these unruly areas became one of the factors of lower education and higher poverty among Ethiopian-Israelis (Kaplan & Hagar, 124).

Another reason housing was difficult and that many Ethiopians ended up together, is that the Israeli government did not want to separate Ethiopian families. Nuclear families in Ethiopia may not be what Westerners usually think of nuclear families. Ethiopian nuclear families might include uncles, aunts, or cousins. And going back to the high context culture of Ethiopia, we can infer that Ethiopians might prefer to live near one another, where they have already built some foundation for trust.

Project Unity

The purpose of my Engaged Learning Project, the Unity Pilot Project, was to promote intercultural understanding between Ethiopian-Israeli youth and Israeli youth. Project Unity was planned to be implemented with ENP’s Ethiopian Israeli youth and Israeli youth during ENP’s summer camps. Project unity was planned to have ten sessions with different

activities that would serve to unite Ethiopian Israelis and Israelis. Most of these sessions were soccer instruction and play, with other optional sessions such as multicultural cooking. The sessions were planned based on a one hour time frame for each session.

Implementing Project Unity was more difficult than expected. The ratio of Ethiopian-Israelis to Israelis at the ENP youth center I was serving at was high. There were about 15-20 Ethiopian-Israelis and only about 2-3 Israelis visiting the center depending on the day. That ratio didn't allow for good intercultural understanding. Not only that, but the girls were not as interested in soccer as I thought they might be. Soccer seemed to be seen as a male sport in Israel the same way football is viewed as a male sport in America. Lack of organization, lack of time, and a language barrier, amongst other factors, made me realize that it might be better to adapt my project to something I could implement immediately.

I decided I wanted to empower the girls to give them the self-confidence to overcome any obstacle they may face. Not only did I feel that I could better relate to the girls, being a woman myself, but Ethiopian women encounter different gender roles in Israel than those held in Ethiopia. Ethiopian women are encouraged to take a greater role in Israel than in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, women have fewer freedoms in the male dominated society. However, in Israel women are given more responsibility and autonomy than in their native country (Kaplan & Hagar, 136). Ethiopian-Israeli women now have the choice to make decisions about their education and family, for example, how far they would like to pursue their education, or the number of children they would like to have. More of them work outside of the home and they all join the Israeli army. To see women with so much independence from men would be very unusual in Ethiopian society. The loss of control males once had in Ethiopia causes them to be resentful (Kaplan & Hagar, 136). These new cultural behaviors often clash with their old ones and adjusting is

difficult. I wanted the girls to be confident that they could grow into the new roles they were being introduced to. To do this I planned three girls' nights, each one being about two hours long.

The girls' nights at ENP became my biggest success! At girls' nights we made pita pizza, falafel, and even once had a potluck where the girls brought Ethiopian food from home. The girls were so excited and proud to tell me about the dishes they had each brought. We also made journals and created our own family crests which were representative of our own family, values, and other important information we wished to portray. At the first girls' night, there was some miscommunication between the counselor and I, and I had some problems getting the girls to participate or stay on task. However, by the last girls' night, every girl was participating, every girl was laughing, and every girl was exploring their identity as Ethiopian-Israelis. Some deeper conversations occurred only because of these girls' nights. It was amazing.

Personal Reflections

I learned that a proposal can look nice and neat on paper, but it may not be as neat in reality. There will be things that happen that are unexpected. When I arrived at the organization, many things were different than expected: the ratio of Ethiopian-Israelis to Israelis was higher, the schedule of the youth center was less structured, the cultural differences and language barrier were bigger, etc.

The language barrier was a greater problem than I anticipated. I knew I was only a beginner in Hebrew, but I thought everything could still work out. I had been told another girl was volunteering that knew Hebrew and could help me translate. She was there, and she did, but it was hard for me to ask deeper questions. Not only was there a language barrier, but also a

cultural barrier. The kids behaved differently than what I was used to from my own experience in Texas. They were much more energetic, and at the same time, more shy. At times it was hard to discern where certain behaviors might have come from, for example, Ethiopian culture, Israeli culture, or socioeconomic status. The staff communicated differently. They preferred me to be very honest and direct with them instead of a “diplomatic politeness” I had grown up learning at home. I think my project would have gone better if I had visited the organization and gotten to know the youth before I proposed what I wanted to do with them. I also think the responsibilities of my project should have better matched my Hebrew level.

When I wasn't implementing Project Unity, I acted similar to the way a camp counselor would act except I had no authority over the youth. I tried to engage the kids through playing checkers, making arts and crafts, playing basketball, swimming with them, and more. I joined them on field trips and helped the counselors with whatever they might have needed at the time. One time I got to go with the staff at ENP to hear one of the kid's mother's stories of how she came to Israel. That was a very special opportunity.

It was interesting to see that all of the kids at the center spoke Hebrew well. None of them knew English, even though English is taught in 4th grade in Israel. This made me feel like they were not paying as much attention in school, or at least in the English subject. I also understood that maybe this was because some of them already spoke two languages and a third one was too much on their plate. Some of them knew Amharic, some of them did not. Some of them had Amharic names and used them as their names in Israel, others had Amharic and Hebrew names, and others had solely Hebrew names. This was representative of the many ways to integrate into a culture.

ENP's youth outreach centers are necessary because there is a big cultural gap to fill and it is important for Ethiopian-Israeli youth to have a place to go when they need a resource, a role model, peers that are going through the same things, or just to have something to do.

I've been thinking about how Ethiopian integration into Israeli society could become more comfortable. Perhaps putting Ethiopian-Israelis in a Kibbutz community rather than in a city would be more successful. Another solution might be having a mandatory class for all youth in Israel that discusses cultural differences and similarities and embraces diversity.

As far as integration goes, immigrants do need to adapt to the culture of their destination country, however; the destination country should also meet them part way. The destination country should make an effort to learn about and provide some of the needs of the new immigrant culture. When one side sees the other side making an effort, they are more willing to make an effort too.

Although my time with ENP was sometimes frustrating, and sometimes I questioned whether I was making a difference or not, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and in the end I know I made a difference and became a better leader. Even if I couldn't always communicate with the kids to the level that I wanted to, playing a simple game of checkers allowed us to bond and made an impact. Showing genuine passion and care is not something you have to say. I showed it, and I know the kids had seen it.

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