

ETHIOPIAN PUPILS: CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL BELONGING AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT – A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines changes in feelings of school belonging and social engagement of Israeli-Ethiopian pupils, linking them to achievement and inclusive-supportive school environment. The study brings forward the pupils' voice, the home class teacher's assessment and the school's head master conceptions, on inclusion and support in one elementary school in Israel. The school's environment is focused on social-emotional support, aiming to promote achievement, by enhancing feelings of school belonging and social engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The study was part of a longitudinal intervention, aimed to assess a support program, PACT+. PACT (Parents and Children Together) is a program for Ethiopian-Israeli pre-school children and their parents aimed to advance successful integration in the education system and Israeli society. The program was implemented in the end of the nineties, addressing the language and cultural gaps which led to considerable differences between the achievement performance of the Ethiopian-Israeli children and their non-Ethiopian counterpart. In 2002/3, PACT+, was added, providing additional support to Ethiopian-Israeli children in elementary schools (Habib, Ben-Rabi, Somekh, Konstantinov, Angel, 2013). This study focused on the impact of PACT+ in one elementary school, in a southern city in Israel.

Feelings of belonging and social engagement at school

Student engagement is defined by Willms (2003) as "a disposition towards learning, working with others, and functioning in a social institution" (p.8). It includes pupils' sense of school belonging, the extent to which they value schooling outcomes, and their psychological investment in learning. Measures of these aspects of engagement are classified as social, institutional, and intellectual engagement. Engagement and learning are linked, and are part of processes that begin in early childhood and continue through life. Therefore, engagement is an important school component, alongside academic achievement (Willms, 2014; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Pupils' school engagement is seen as a multidimensional construct, including three components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

Pupils who are actively involved in their own education, understand its importance to their future, and manage to create positive relations at school, are more likely to do well academically (Motti-Stefanidi, Masten, & Asendorpf, 2011). These conditions require an inclusive and shared learning experience environment, involving teaching staff and school climate (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). Willms (2011) found that schools vary in their levels of engagement, partly due to variations in "drivers of student outcomes" that include: quality instruction, teacher-student relations, classroom learning climate, expectations for success, and student advocacy.

Integration of the Israeli Ethiopian's in the Israeli society

At the end of 2015 the Israeli Ethiopian population in Israel was around 138.2 thousand, 85.6 thousand born in Ethiopia, 49.6 thousand born in Israel (The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, [CBS], 2015). Data shows significant gaps between learning performance of the Ethiopian-Israeli children and their peers. The gaps were most evident in the low percentages of Ethiopian-Israeli pupils who received matriculation certificate, and in the low rate of Ethiopian-Israeli university pupils (Weisblat, 2010; Ben-Rabi et al., 2011). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data, in 1998, 30% of Ethiopian-Israeli pupils received a matriculation certificate, vs. 52% of the rest of the pupils (CBS, 2009). Ministry of Education tests for 2013 indicated that the

scholastic performance of 75% of the Ethiopian-Israeli pupils in fifth and eighth grades that year were lower than the national average in English, science, mathematics and Hebrew but there was a clear tendency of improvement (Dayan, 2014). It seems that the gaps between the Israeli-Ethiopian pupils and other pupils in mathematics and language are still significant, but there is an improvement (Dayan, 2014; CBS & Ministry of Education, 2013).

Partly explanations to these gaps are the challenges that the Israeli-Ethiopian families have to cope with, such as: language difficulties for both children and parents, the inability of many parents to read and write, even in their mother tongue (Amharic or Tigrinya), and the transition from what was, in most cases, an illiterate environment to one that places great importance on literacy. In addition, lack of knowledge and use of written language, little awareness how to utilize public services such as family health clinics, afterschool activities and public libraries and difficulty accessing them. Also, the inability to afford early childhood educational frameworks and little knowledge of the advantages they offer, cultural differences in the perception of the parents' and teachers' role, difficulties to access employment, and financial difficulties.

These challenges are reflected in the absence of stimulation and enrichment aids that are normally found in Western homes, such as books and games (King et al., 2003). PACT+ tries to offer support to the Israeli-Ethiopian children at school, since it seemed that the parents possibilities to help their children at home were partial at best, in most cases. The support focused on creating academic and inclusive opportunities at school, promoting feelings of belonging and social engagement.

This study focuses on identifying and analyzing feelings of school belonging and social engagement of Israeli-Ethiopian pupils in one elementary school and their links to academic performance. Accordingly, this study asked two questions:

1. What are the characteristics of feelings of school belonging and social engagement (in their home class and at school) of Israeli-Ethiopian pupils?
2. What characterizes the social-emotional school environment in the participating school?

METHODOLOGY

The study was mostly qualitative, based on a phenomenological paradigm assuming there are essences of shared experiences, and striving to reveal them (van Manen, 2007). Quantitative analysis was performed on two main concepts: statements expressing high feelings of belonging /lack of belonging to school and statements expressing high social involvement/ social alienation. Accordingly, the study brought forward pupils' experiences, from their point of view (Patton, 2015), while adding to their descriptions the home class teachers' report (assessment of social engagement and achievement) and the head master's description of school activities (aimed to enhance feelings of belonging and social engagement in pupils and teaching staff). These additional voices served as a counterbalance to the pupils' experiences, enlarging and hopefully strengthening the picture.

Research tools

Trying to capture both the essence of the individual and collective experience, three interviews were built:

- a) Pupils interview referred to their feelings at school, social relations with their class members and other children at school, included 10 questions (Appendix A).
 - b) Home class teachers' interview presented the social activities and the class' social characteristics. The teachers were also asked to classify their pupils social engagement in two points of time, present and past-a year ago, using a five scale measure (Appendix B,D).
 - c) The schools' head master interview referred to school social policy and its social input (appendix, C).
- The interviews were performed individually, in the second semester (March-June) after obtaining agreement from all participants. All interviews were recorded and later typed. Three researchers performed the interviews, two of them had no former acquaintance with the school, the third researcher worked in the PACT+ project and initiated the research.

Participants

Pupils - 27 pupils (Israeli-Ethiopian) were interviewed, 16 boys and 11 girls. The pupils were from third fourth and fifth grade: 11 pupils from third grade, 9 pupils from fourth grade and 7 from fifth grade. Teachers -7 home class teachers (the interviewed pupils studied in their home class) were interviewed, 4 veteran and 3 un-experienced teachers.

The head master - The School head master was interviewed at the end of the year.

Data Analysis

Four questions (4/10) in the pupils' interviews gave information about feelings of belonging, such as "do you feel good at school?" "what makes you feel so?". Data about social involvement was obtained from 6 questions. Deductive content analysis (Mayring, 2014) of the interviews with the pupils and quantitative analysis focused on two main concepts: statements expressing high feelings of belonging/lack of belonging to school and statements expressing high social involvement /social alienation.

Data analysis process identified three levels, based on the following indicators: positive statements expressing persistence and/or enthusiasm, and/or many details- were graded as high level, as opposed to very short positive statements that did not express enthusiasm and did not mention persistence- were graded medium level and negative statements that were graded low level. Reliability examinations (using triangulation techniques) were performed between the analysts (Patton, 2015). Feelings of belonging and social involvement of pupils were calculated by using the mean grade of all the interviews questions relevant to both issues.

In addition to the interviews, teachers filled up a questionnaire with a five level scale (on achievement and social involvement, Appendix, D). The data was analyzed by frequency tests. Class social and emotional climate and the head master interview were analyzed by qualitative methods using deductive content analysis techniques (Flick, 2009). School analysis as a social-emotional environment was performed by using open coding, bottom up (inductive), identifying content categories. Following primary analysis, charting analysis was performed linking categories and derive overall meaning (Mayring, 2014).

FINDINGS

The finding will be presented by the two research questions, regarding pupils', teachers' and headmaster's point of view.

First research question- What are the characteristics of feelings of school belonging and social engagement (in their home class and at school) of Israeli-Ethiopian pupils?

Pupils-report-Feelings of belonging

Question: "Do you feel good at school?"

Most pupils answered they feel good at school, when asked if something bothers them at school, most answered that nothing bothers them. Classifying the belonging feeling, 18 pupils were graded high (10 boys and 8 girls). Many expressed feelings of belonging to their class, school, friends and teachers. Such as: Do you feel good in your class?

"Yes, I have many friends that help and support me"

What makes you feel good at school?

"Support, friends that help...if I fall they help, they do not abandon me" (pupil/girl, interview no.7). Boys referred more to friends and games and girls to mutual help, support from friends and teacher contribution. Feelings of belonging of both boys and girls were based on social relationships and less on the educational/achievement aspect.

When asked what bothers them at school, more than half of them answered "nothing". Pupils that mentioned bothering issues reported mainly social aspects and when asked what makes them feel good mentioned social and educational aspects. We found no pupil who said that he/she doesn't feel well at school because of low achievement. High achievement was mentioned in context of good feelings.

Expressions that hint on internalization of values of consideration were found at about a quarter of the pupils, such as:"I saw a girl that was not playing with anyone... everyone ridiculed her... I saw her and spoke to her and then my friends came too... I'm always good with people, I always want to help everyone and if I do so, people will help me too... (pupil/girl ,interview no.1).

Social involvement

The pupils reported on social involvement at school, on excursions, shows and ceremonies, and in tasks they perform. Pupils seemed to love extracurricular activity that school initiated. They talked about these activities in detail, with enthusiasm and reported persistence. 11 boys and 8 girls were graded by the researchers as high in social involvement.

Teachers reports on social involvement

The teachers described most pupils as actively involved in social activities in class and in school. 33% of the pupils participated in school activities according to teachers' report. 22% participated and were active on class level, 30% participated in social activities but did not initiate them and 15% participated in social activities in small social groups. Since 20/27 of the pupils were in the third-fourth grade, their involvement in a small group seems to be a normal developmental phase. No pupil was graded "does not participate". Teachers reported high involvement of boys 11/16 (69%) and of girls 4/11 (36%). It seems that teachers evaluated boys as more involved in school activities. Some differences were found between teachers' and pupils reports.

Teachers described Ethiopian pupils as part of the class variance. One teacher said: "They are well integrated in all areas, social, learning, excellency. I see them as part of the class, there is no special Ethiopian group" (Teacher no.2).

Teachers' achievement reports of Ethiopian pupils

Teachers reported that 55% of pupils were high achievers in all subjects. 15% were characterized as medium achievers and 30% low. Regarding the 27 pupils that participated, 13 significantly improved, only 2 pupils were reported as low achievers that did not improve.

Second research question- What characterizes the social-emotional school environment in the participating school?

The school's emotional- social environment- What promotes pupils' best development ?

Data referring to school showed evidence of pupils' social - emotional support: "First I'm in love , I am very connected to them, their homes, parents... it's hard work, but it's done with love. Without love there is no gain...(Teacher, no.4). Two themes were identified in school analysis as an educational-emotional environment: a system that emphasizes excellency and support in pupil's wellbeing.

System focus on excellency

In the studied school there is an ongoing experiment emphasizing excellency as a leading ideology. There are signs of systemic work consisting of shared goals and values. It can be seen in the doings and synergy in the systems' circles: management, teachers, pupils, community/parents. It can also be detected in the schools language. Values of cooperation, team work, consideration and tolerance are emphasized. Teachers express belief in their doings with pupils. Interview analysis identified systemic work:

The school has a conceptual ideology as a leading axis

Characteristics of environment that supports excellency were identified. Excellency is seen as a shared property for all pupils, in complex and diverse developmental routes, as a process that enables continuous improvement, through clear developmental structures. Competitiveness, is emphasized as a mean for personal development and not as social comparison. There is a shared language between the different partners referring to school values. As one of the teachers said: "we drip it and we see it work..."(Teacher no.3). The headmaster said: "The experiment plan leans on two conceptions: excellency, especially academic, and the wellbeing of the pupil." One of the teachers said: "There is a good ambience in the school, not only in my class. This experiment united the school, we feel it, it elevated the children's motivation to succeed, we talked to them continuously about persistence, determination, how it leads to achievement and success. When there are failures we encouraged them , personal talks..." (Teacher, no.3). A pupil said: "I love school very much, especially my home class teacher and I have a lot of friends. I love my class were everyone supports me..."(Pupil, no. 1)

The headmaster presents a linking conception (synergy) between different aspects of school life, that influences and projects on each other: " The experiment leans on two layers: learning and wellbeing. Care that focuses on the social fosters wellbeing, ... we foster the will to contribute to others, to be involved, to respect..."

Conception of multi culture and community A multi-cultural conception was apparent, as the head master said: "We bring them a lot to school, we mention their holidays, at the beginning of month Nissan we have a food exhibition. We have an inter-generation program, connecting grand- parents... the school is highly respected in the community..." The school initiates diverse activities with parents, such as class leadership, ceremonies and parents cooperation.

The Ethiopian pupils are seen by the school's headmaster as part of the school's growing narrative , and as a motivational resource to the change process that has taken place during the years, as the head master said:

"maybe some of them were the trigger of the excellency matter, because when we began to think about the experiment five years ago the difficulty was to see the ethnic group with such low self- image..." School began the experiment with a sport group of pupils with behavior difficulties "They improved.... from there we went to the excellency program..."

The headmaster concludes: "The Ethiopian pupils are part of school, part of all that happens at school. They do not fall behind compared to others and their achievements are similar to other parts in the population normal curve."

Support given to the school teachers to develop and realize their uniqueness

School was characterized also by supporting teachers' uniqueness, identifying interest and power areas and giving them possibilities to implement their resources. The head master: " I go from class to class and I see how much each home class teacher devotes to Lag Baomer (a Jewish holiday), to the bonfire, it's important to them, they care... I let each team, each teacher soar whichever directions she chooses... each activity is boundless, the sky is the limit..."

Wellbeing support

School believes that Excellency needs an environment that supports it. Interviews analysis identified three aspects of wellbeing support: processes that strengthen feelings of belonging, consideration and feeling protected, supporting autonomy and capability. The headmaster and the teachers emphasize actions that created a social-emotional wellbeing climate in class. They mentioned support in belonging, consideration and mutual help, as an integral part of their work. "The social aspect is central in school and is implemented in the various actions that we initiate. It begins with social leadership, giving each pupil a function, trying to maximize individual potential in social relations. These can be seen in the house of justice, pupils' council, trusteeship in classes, various tutoring..." (Headmaster).

Diverse activities that support pupil's feelings of belonging, consideration and feeling protected: skill development of team work and cooperation, encouraging sharing and helping each other, creating opportunities to express feelings and solve personal problems, preventing injuries, solitude /social rejection. There was notable work on defining boundaries and restraining violence. School maintained a complex system of children tutoring, that supported each other such as sports games and celebrating birthdays. Teachers implemented programs such as Life skills and Key of heart (educational programs in use in the Israeli educational system). Teachers initiated activities that consolidated the class and encouraged tolerance "it's endless... the system focuses on social activities..." (Headmaster)

Autonomy Support and Empowerment

School emphasized the uniqueness in each child. Each child had an area that he/she excels or he/she aspires to excel, each child has an assignment in class and each class has a duty to perform. School supported processes of choice and initiative - the children planned programs and activities. There was emphasis on creating an environment that enabled pupils to get acquainted with their strengths and uniqueness.

Capability Support

We also found school supported pupils ability feelings and success. Learning programs were adapted, and there was support in home work. Excellence areas enabled support in child's abilities, and there was support for pupils that aspired to excel in defined areas. The children experienced success in school and outside it. There was a strong belief of the teachers in the children's abilities and the potential for change in social and academic areas. These beliefs were expressed in the teachers talk about most children. There was a tendency to look at the children's strengths. Teachers described strength points for 20 children (75% of pupils participants). The strength areas were described mostly by the excellency subjects, such as dance, English, house of justice or through the social channel (responsibility in class games, pupil council), or by personality traits such as social sensitivity, willingness to give ("he is a boy with a great soul, helps, notices things around him...." (Teacher no, 4).

CONCLUSIONS

It seemed, based on teachers' report, that the Israeli-Ethiopian pupils performed in the medium high level of achievements comparing to other pupils in school. Internal estimation processes of P.A.C.T program also indicated a positive picture regarding achievement. The social picture showed involvement and participation of

most pupils in school life. These pupils also reported feelings of belonging to school and class. We found expressions that hint towards internalization of consideration values. What enabled this? Remembering that this population was characterized as under achievers and feelings of alienation and lack of belonging (Haviv, et.al., 2013).

Research indicates that school environment that supports pupils psychological needs leads to positive outcomes and enables optimal development, intrinsic motivation, investment, wellbeing, social adaptation and learning achievements (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Motti-Stefanidi, et.al, 2011). Our data analysis characterized the school as a supporting environment in four basic needs: belonging, relations, capability and autonomy. By the self-determined theory (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), children need to experience feelings of belonging to their environment, enabling them to maintain close, safe and rewarding relationships with various persons, and be part of a community (Mind Matters, 2014).

Children need to experience feeling of efficiency, to be able to implement plans, goals and aspirations that are not always easy to fulfill (feeling of capability). They need an environment that enables them to express themselves authentically, meaningful, independence and freedom of choice (need for autonomy). In this school the environment supported these needs (Willms, 2003; Roeser et. al.,1996; Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Noble & McGrath, 2016).

School analysis indicated a multi-cultural environment that emphasized excellency development. We identified synergy learning, educational, emotional-social and community processes. It seems that this climate created conditions for wellbeing for all pupils, including Israeli-Ethiopian pupils. Autonomic motivation was found positively connected to feelings of self-fulfillment and significantly negative to emotional erosion in teachers (Roth et al., 2007).

The headmaster supported teachers uniqueness and initiatives, and school functioned as a wellbeing environment for teaching too. The organizational characteristics identified in this paper appear in former research as characteristics of successful schools, led by headmasters with vision (such as Mulford & Silins, 2003). Fisher & Hayman (2008) indicated four aspects that test schools excellency and success: organizational excellency (headmasters' leadership, sharing decision making with team, clear organizational goals, ability to cope with problems, team involvement with organization), social excellency (social activities quality), community excellence (seeing parents as a community and cooperating with them), and pedagogic excellency (innovations of curriculum and achievements). These aspects were identified in the school. The study's results were presented to the school staff and it strengthened the staff's conception about the importance of pupils emotional-social support, in addition to insights gained during the received feedback. Example of such an insight was the staff's understanding the need to promote girls' social involvement. The school staff also gave positive feedback to the college staff on their professional doing for the Israeli-Ethiopian pupils.

An important and unsettling issue that needs further research refers to the future achievements of these pupils, since data (Habib et.al., 2013; Weisblai, 2010; CBS, 2015) indicated that these achievements diminishes as the Israeli Ethiopian pupils progress to higher grades and the gap between them and other groups in Israeli education system widens. Does it mean that they need an ongoing supportive environment in order to maintain their school performance? Or maybe an intervention that emphasizes/encourages inner strength and less dependency on external factors? Dayan (2014) reported improvement in the mentioned above areas, is this improvement linked to the educational system?

This study also demonstrated cooperation between school and an academic College. The schools' agreement to participate in the research can be seen as an expression of a growing evaluation culture and feelings of trust, seeing the College team as a partner.

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APPENDIX A- PUPIL INTERVIEW

1. Who is your best friend?
2. With whom would you like to be friends? Why? Do you think you can be his/her friend? What can you do to be his/her friend?
3. Do you attend any social activity in the afternoon? Which one?
4. Do you visit friends in the afternoon? What do you do together?
5. Are you a member in the class/school committee? If you are, what is your assignment? Were you a member last year too?
6. Did you participate in a school performance, tell about it. Did you participated last year too?
7. Do you go out with your class to excursions? Did you go out last year too?
8. Do you do your homework with friends from your class? With whom? And why with them?
9. Do you feel good in class? Why?
10. Do you have this year more friends than last year?

APPENDIX B- TEACHER INTERVIEW

Ask the teacher details about her educational experience and ask her to bring list of home-class pupils.

1. Describe your class socially, friends, groups, conflicts, arguments...
2. Tell about your pupils behavior during breaks
3. Is there class activity in the afternoon? If so, tell about it
4. What social activities take place in your class, such as birthdays, evening gatherings, holiday parties, contest- tell about them
5. Who are involved in these activities?
6. Are your pupils members in a youth organization? Tell me about it
7. Who are the class leaders, tell me about them
8. Do you report to any one in school about the class' social activity?

APPENDIX C- HEAD MASTER INTERVIEW

1. Tell me about the social activities that are initiated by the school
2. Who participates in these activities? Pupils, teachers, parents, others?
3. What would you want to promote in this subject?
4. Are you content with the existing social activity?

APPENDIX D- TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Classify the pupils in the below table by their achievements: If there are significant differences, please tell about them in reference to the mentioned pupil

Please sort the following pupils by their social involvement in class and at school. If there are significant changes, please explain them

Participated in social activity in class last year (high involvement/mediocre/ low) please write down details 1 2 3 4 5	Participates in social activities in class and at school (high involvement/ mediocre/low) Please mention activities that the pupil is involved more and which one less 1 2 3 4 5	Pupils' name
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