

The Experiences of Israeli Early Childhood Educators Working With Children of Ethiopian Background

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Abstract

This study offers an in-depth examination of the experiences of early childhood educators, focusing on their work with Ethiopian immigrant children and their families. We aim to describe and analyze the teachers' insider views vis-à-vis the challenges faced by these children and their parents in the Israeli preschool system. Using narrative methodology, the analysis of findings is based upon 20 stories written by 10 early childhood educators. It reveals that for these teachers, the chief struggle is their relationship with the parents of their Ethiopian pupils, one characterized by difficulties, frustrations, and burdens. The engagement with parents of Ethiopian children exhibited a range of possibilities: from the expression of patronizing, hierarchical viewpoints, to a search for ad hoc ways of coping with a persistent cultural gap, to the attainment of genuine, successful partnerships. Lack of sufficient knowledge and understanding of the unique cultural attributes of the Ethiopian community appears to be the basis for the teachers' view of the parents as lacking faith in them and in the educational system as a whole. In addition, suggestions are made about implications for educational practice and for policies that might assist teachers in ameliorating these challenges via the development of, and professional training in, skills which help coping with the problems and dilemmas unique to the multicultural classroom.

Keywords

early childhood education, children, Ethiopian, multicultural

Introduction

The capabilities, perceptions, and self-efficacy of educators greatly affect the quality of immigrant children's integration into their receiving society. As the first professional-educational figures to encounter the children upon their arrival, preschool teachers play an important role in receiving immigrant children. These teachers are influential in determining their immigrant students' future attitudes to learning, to the educational system, and to society as a whole, as well as in building the children's self-identity and self-esteem and in creating a trusting relationship between the school system and immigrant families.

Preschool teachers in Israel are in a unique position because their classes are physically and structurally distinct from the primary school system. They work in autonomous professional units, each consisting of the teacher, a semi-professional assistant, and up to 35 children per class. Like other teachers, they have been found to suffer from overwork, but particularly kindergarten teachers in Israel are the unmet needs of support, sharing, and professional recognition. This situation has created the simultaneous experience of loneliness on one hand, and satisfaction with their autonomy and status within their own professional world on the other (Firstater, 2012). In this

study, we explore the question of what can be learned from the teachers' experiences of working with Ethiopian children in kindergarten.

Kindergarten teachers' perceptions, experiences, and professional knowledge have implications for their work with children of Ethiopian origin. Analyzing the kindergarten teachers' stories enabled an examination of how they perceived the beliefs and social norms of Ethiopian society, how the teachers related to the immigrants' values, and how they coped with educating immigrant children from a different culture.

Teachers' Attitudes Toward Families and Children From a Minority Culture

Successful multicultural education is linked to teachers' attitudes and self-awareness, as well as to their willingness to

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engage in self-criticism and to show empathy toward minority groups and children of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to interact with immigrant children and their families, to legitimize the minority language in the classroom, to acknowledge the existence of different cultures, and to develop positive attitudes among the other students and teaching staff toward the students from the minority group (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Lee & Dallman, 2008). When relations between teachers and children from different ethno-cultural backgrounds lack cultural sensitivity, conflicts and significant misunderstandings can result. These problems may prevent the children from receiving effective developmental support that does not pressure them to disregarding their cultural identities and does not diminish their pride in their cultures of origin (Han & Thomas, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Kemple, 2004). Notwithstanding the empathy educators express toward such children in conjunction with listing all the challenges involved, the teachers are also often critical toward the children's cultural worlds, perceiving these cultures as factors that hinder the students' achievement levels and affect their attitudes to learning. Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal (2005) have examined teachers' levels of understanding of the cultures of their students' families and the implications of this understanding for the teachers' attitudes toward the parents. Although on the conceptual level the teachers appreciate the importance of the culture and its influences on the children, these educators are not adequately equipped to translate this understanding into practice, instead emphasizing only external aspects of the culture such as food, clothing, celebrations, and stories.

The rapid increase in immigration rates of people with different ethnic origins in the Western world and the subsequent demand that teachers develop culturally sensitive learning programs are usually not supported with appropriate training to provide mainstream education for children from varied backgrounds (Santoro, 2009). In Israeli culture, it is difficult to implement the multicultural approach, to change teaching methods and educational programs, and to recognize and integrate the children's cultural backgrounds (Geldi, 2009). To this end, training is required for culturally responsive teaching (Han & Thomas, 2010), including increasing awareness and sensitivity to intercultural differences as well as multicultural knowledge about the values, worldviews, and norms of both the teachers and children. Also necessary is the development of relevant proficiencies, such as the ability to establish a "skilled dialogue" in the relationship between children and their families from different cultural backgrounds (Barrera & Corso, 2002). Increasing parents' trust and sense of belonging can lead to the development of an environment that respects cultural differences and invites all students to accept and explore new, unfamiliar cultures (Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Carter, 2007); other positive results include the creation of communication channels that will remain permanently open (Jones, 2010).

Early childhood is an especially suitable stage at which to begin educating toward multiculturalism. At this young age,

through appropriate mediation, racist attitudes can be changed and prejudices reduced (Ogletree & Larke, 2010). This goal can be achieved by designing a learning environment that reflects the values of its students, adapting learning programs, and giving children the opportunity to present and describe their society's customs with pride (Chavkin, 2005).

Educators Working With Families From Diverse Cultures

Working with preschool-age children in general—and from differing cultural backgrounds in particular—demands the development of a relationship with the pupil's family. According to Bermúdez and Márquez (1996), the primary communication barriers between teachers and parents from different cultural backgrounds are related to differences in language, education, and child-rearing methods. These barriers are also related to the parents' troubled relationships with the educational system, relationships characterized by unfamiliarity, bad experiences, and lack of understanding, leading to a lack of trust. These problems are exacerbated by teachers' prejudices, lack of sensitivity, and sometimes even blame directed toward the families for their supposed lack of values and for not educating their children in accord with what the teachers believe to be an appropriate manner (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005).

When the families of immigrant children are disconnected from the kindergarten, the children become a vulnerable group that does not receive a good educational foundation prior to starting school, resulting in significant gaps from the start of these students' school careers (Pelletier & Corter, 2005). The best way of involving parents from different cultural backgrounds is to maintain open communication channels, to hold discussions in which parents and teachers can become acquainted with each other's cultures, as well as to organize activities in the classroom that respect multiculturalism and the principle of inclusion (Joshi et al., 2005).

Children from minority cultures have a much better chance of academic success when the school builds partnerships with their families and learns about their values and customs. This openness serves to create a safe learning environment for minority groups and increases their sense of belonging, which is crucial to success in the classroom (Chavkin, 2005; Joshi et al., 2005; Purnell et al., 2007; Wegmann & Bowen, 2010). Furthermore, Bermúdez and Márquez (1996) have demonstrated that immigrant families who are involved in their children's education are more successful in helping them progress.

The Integration of Ethiopian Immigrants Into the Israeli Educational System

Most Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in two large waves in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a slow stream of immigration up to the present day. By 2009, the Ethiopian population in

Israel numbered approximately 130,000 people (Leibel, 2009). Their absorption was made more difficult because of their skin color, doubts about the authenticity of their Jewishness, their low educational levels, broad cultural differences, their concentration in distressed neighborhoods, and the limited opportunities available to them in employment. In addition, Ethiopian immigrants were stigmatized as a “different” and “problematic” community (Leibel, 2009; Shabtay, 2001). These difficulties resulted in psychological stress, a sense of disappointment and affront, crises within the family, and a sense of foreignness because of their skin color, which hindered their acceptance as equals in Israeli society (Walsh & Tuval-Mashiach, 2012).

The Ethiopian immigrants—who experienced a sudden transition from a rural, agricultural culture to a Western, industrialized society—were required to cope with a multiplicity of changes. Their consciousness of difference from the rest of Israeli society was expressed in oppositional attitudes toward figures of authority, the withholding of negative emotions, and avoidance of asking questions, making requests, or taking initiative. Helplessness, confusion, misunderstanding, the sense of a lack of control, and weakening of mutual familial support were other expressions of the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation (BenEzer, 1992).

These cultural changes and immigration difficulties affected the children’s absorption into the Israeli educational system. Typical of this process was their separation from other students as a result of their high concentration in distressed neighborhoods with weak educational institutions. Ethiopian immigrant children therefore encountered native Israeli students mainly from disadvantaged segments of society. Also endemic in the educational system was the indiscriminate referral of Ethiopian children to residential facilities, conveying the message of a lack of trust in the parents’ ability to educate them, as well as the overreferral of these students to the special education system (Mulat & Arcavi, 2009). Consequently, Ethiopian children, who were already suffering from barriers and stereotypes because of their skin color, were found to underachieve at school and in higher education and to have a high rate of drop-out, dissociation, and delinquency (Goldblatt & Rosenblum, 2011).

Geiger (2012) found that, according to the children’s accounts, teachers had negative attitudes toward them. In a study in Israel in which 232 sixth-grade students were interviewed about teachers’ verbal violence, it was found that teachers tended to target immigrants from Ethiopia in verbal attacks, separate them from their classmates during games and parties, hint at their low levels of culture and education, and make insulting remarks about the parents’ lack of education and inability to help their children.

In kindergartens in Israel, difficulties in relations with Ethiopian students have been found to be based upon the absence of an atmosphere of mutual respect as well as an inadequate understanding of Ethiopian cultural norms (Tzur

& Eshel, 2003). One of the repercussions of these inadequacies has been the very slow development of trust in the educational system among the parents of Ethiopian students (Geldi, 2009).

Certain steps have already been taken in Israeli society to cope with these phenomena. They include the increased participation of young, educated members of the Ethiopian community in social and educational programs, the creation of intercultural bridging and initiatives for promoting inclusion in the educational system, and strengthening the involvement and authority of Ethiopian parents (Sever, 2004). Nevertheless, the issue of education in a multicultural society poses a challenge of the highest degree at all levels of the educational system, starting in preschool education and continuing through teacher training educational programs. The attitudes and approaches of educators toward this population are of vital significance to the future of these children.

Method

The aim of the present article is to provide an insider’s view of the ways in which kindergarten teachers in Israel perceive their work with pupils of Ethiopian origin and their families. The narrative method guides our methodology (Polkinghorne, 1995), giving us the opportunity to learn about lived experience through the practical and personal knowledge recounted in teachers’ written accounts (Bruner, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

Sample

Participants in the present study were selected by purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). The data consisted of 20 narrative stories told by 10 participating kindergarten teachers, who had professional experience working with Ethiopian children and their families. The choice of sample in qualitative research is based on conceptual and theoretical decisions guided by research aims. Purposive sampling allows access to a multiplicity of perspectives. In the case at hand, the selection criteria were kindergarten teachers who worked in the North of Israel in low-income neighborhoods, where the highest percentage of the Ethiopian community resides. The participants were between 30 and 55 years of age, and their work experience as kindergarten teachers ranged from 5 to 23 years.

These kindergarten teachers were prompted to write down two separate stories about significant experiences they had while teaching Ethiopian children. The stories were to be written in an open manner, with the component parts of beginning, middle, and end (Lieblich et al., 1998). The research aims were described in full to the participants who wrote their stories by hand in their places of work. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the promised anonymity of the participants.

Analysis

Data analysis included open coding to enable the identification of units of meaning. A cross-case analysis followed in which segments from each interview were condensed until core themes emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Patton, 2002). This process was completed by all three of the authors of this study separately, and then compared to ensure intercoder reliability. The themes, which emerged from the analysis, are differentiated from the prompt to write about significant experiences with Ethiopian children. For example, the theme “Patronizing stances toward parents: ‘They smile and say yes, yes, and then continue in their own way,’” is based on several different accounts of the multiple ways that teachers showed patronizing stances toward Ethiopian children and their families. Our cross-case analysis revealed that all those different perspectives fall under a unified spectrum. This spectrum is the content of first theme. Three primary themes emerged from the data and serve as the backbone of our analysis.

Trustworthiness

In the present article, credibility is established through the systematic presentation of written stories and their analyses, a format that allows the reader to evaluate the ways in which reality was constructed and themes were derived (Maxwell, 2005). In qualitative research, the emphasis shifts from validity to validation. Rather than presenting a finished product, researchers describe the process by which they arrived at the specific constructions underlying the study, and thus allow readers to make their own judgments and to validate or reject the interpretations suggested (Angen, 2000; Patton, 2002). For example, the theme “They don’t play by our rules” is presented in the following manner: First, contextual information regarding the particular research participant is offered, followed by a segment of the narrative itself. Afterward, the analysis of the story component is presented, including the context, the structure, and its relationship to the unified theme as well as to the subsequent written account. This detailed process is accessible to the reader in the presentation of findings, and as such serves as a validation tool for the researcher’s systematic work. The focus of such research is on in-depth, subjective analysis of experiences rather than on generalizations. That being said, such an analysis also provides a solid foundation for building a heuristic model on which studies aimed at rigorous generalizations can be based (Babbie, 2004).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Emergent Themes

The primary theme that arose from the analysis of the data was the importance of the teachers’ interactions with the Ethiopian pupils’ parents. All of the written narratives

centered solely on the teachers’ perceptions, relationships, and experiences with the children’s parents, rather than on daily interactions with the pupils themselves. Teachers’ perceptions of Ethiopian immigrant parents ranged from a lack of sensitivity toward these parents, to a desire to diminish cultural variation, to acceptance and understanding of such differences. This continuum included three primary types: (a) a patronizing stance toward parents, (b) a missionary approach that paternalistically aimed at assimilating immigrants, and (c) an open attitude toward learning from cross-cultural encounters and toward establishing mutual partnerships with parents. The written narratives selected and analyzed are representative illustrations of these types.

1. Patronizing stances toward parents: “They smile and say yes, yes, and then continue in their own way.”

A patronizing stance proved to be a primary mode of relating to Ethiopian parents. Teachers who adopted this stance tended to exhibit negative judgments and to criticize the perceived physical neglect of these parents, for example, claiming that the children lacked personal hygiene, wore inappropriate clothing for size and weather conditions, consumed an unhealthy diet, and failed to adhere to kindergarten timetables—tardiness being especially problematic. The teachers’ belief that they were in a better position of knowing and understanding the best interests of the child was often accompanied by frustration caused by the parents’ failure to accept the teacher’s point of view and her efforts to control the situation and improve the students’ situation.

Rivka describes her frustration when an Ethiopian father refused to allow his son to be referred to a special education center for remedial reinforcement. In the case at hand, the mother of the boy was at the time institutionalized in a mental health facility, and the boy was one of six children whom the father solely cared for in the mother’s absence. She writes,

Last year, I had an Ethiopian child whose mother was in a nuthouse [mental institution]. The children were cared for by the father, and there was great neglect . . . The siblings would bring the boy to the kindergarten, and sometimes no one bothered to pick him up. The boy was bright, and it is clear that he had potential, if there would have been any type of investment from the home and good and positive relations towards him. I approached the father and told him that his son needs professional help. The father refused and said that I should not make his son into a “crazy” because he is not! . . . The boy continued to walk the streets in the afternoons, had behavioral problems, and vented his aggression on other children. I pitied him so, but despite everything that I tried to do to persuade the father, nothing helped. I heard that now it still goes on, and the boy receives no help.

Rivka’s patronizing position is reflected in her conviction and assumption that the core of the hardship of the Ethiopian child is rooted solely in what she defines as a neglectful and

negative home. She is the one who knows what is best for the child and is slighted that her efforts for intervention are not realized. Ironically, while she declares her sense of pity and concern for the boy, it is she whose professional integrity is challenged, and thus she becomes the center of the tale. While she believes strongly in her own professional foresight and even backs this up by offering proof of what happens subsequently, her particular solution for the child is externalized as she recommends outside intervention, rather than attempting to remedy the situation within her own kindergarten. She reveals little, if any sensitivity, to the fact that this external, professional recommendation has particularly negative connotations in the unique family situation of the father, nor does she express sympathy for the emotional and logistical struggles of a father parenting six children on his own. The teacher knows best; her advice is ignored; and the prophecy is not prevented. Not only is a child “lost,” but when the “right” help is not accepted, Rivka bears the emotional costs of professional disrespect.

Similarly, Hannah conveys her sense of insult that the norms of her classroom management in the kindergarten are not respected by an Ethiopian mother. The mother works nights and consistently brings her daughter late, insisting upon entering the kindergarten to see what is going on:

When a mother brought her child late [to kindergarten], I went out to the gate and asked her to say goodbye to her daughter outside, like every other parent who comes late. She liked to come into the kindergarten and see what we were doing. No matter how much I tried to explain to her, I didn't succeed, and the mother insisted that she must go inside, and I didn't agree. The mother told the girl that they were leaving and would never come back to the kindergarten. She took a step back, stopped, and said, “If we were Israelis, you wouldn't speak to me that way; it's only because we are Ethiopian.” I was insulted and hurt.

Hannah's working style expresses a strong need for order and control; the norms and codes of the kindergarten offer an important and needed structure for daily routines. Hannah therefore takes matters into her own hands and physically stops the mother at the gate. Setting boundaries, in her eyes, takes precedence over efforts toward interpersonal communication. The desire of the mother to enter the kindergarten is seen only as a disruption of codes and order, and the possibility that positive outcomes could come from such an interaction is not considered. The communication style used by Hannah leaves the mother feeling marginalized both physically and emotionally, and this in turn evokes the sense that her foreignness is at the root of the insult she experiences. The teacher's patronizing stance is revealed in bottom-down communication, both verbal and physical, clearly stating that it is the teacher who defines the sole accepted order and way of being in the kindergarten. Uncharacteristically for this immigrant group, the mother outwardly articulates her experience of discrimination. Despite the fact that the mother

directly communicates her feelings of insult, as in Rivka's narrative, it is the teachers' experience of insult and hurt that is placed at the center of the narrative.

As we have shown, these kindergarten teachers are ambivalent as to how to relate to Ethiopian children and their families. The teachers' narratives alternate between the wish to include Ethiopian immigrants and the need to assert their professional authority. The emotional response to what they perceive as a lack of cooperation is a painful sense of rejection. It appears that they are willing to accept Ethiopian families, provided that the parents unquestioningly accept their authority. As one of the teachers wrote, “They smile and say yes, yes. And then continue in their own way.”

2. The missionary approach: “Even though I present it as a free gift that will truly help the child.”

The teachers in our study expressed a strong and genuine desire to assist Ethiopian children and their families to acclimate and become integrated into Israeli society and culture. However, by analyzing the written narratives of the participating teachers, it becomes apparent that they sometimes adopt an assimilationist approach toward this aim. While their aim is to help, they define help as teaching and educating the immigrants to conform to the norms of the majority. This entails celebrating holidays and birthdays in the “customary” way, adhering to a particular diet, and accepting Israeli parenting norms. Although the teachers display a strong altruistic desire to help, this help is coupled with a very clear message that there is one correct way to be Israeli.

Clara relates to her efforts to educate and socialize the kindergarten parents on dietary matters, explaining her frustration when the Ethiopian parents do not follow suit. She writes,

I see improvements with most of the kindergarten parents as a result of my advice and guidance. It is only the Ethiopians who continue to send their children food without paying attention to my guidelines to provide variety. They send sweet things, and sweet drinks; this is despite the fact that I prohibit it.

Clara is the one in control and believes that her authority is for the ultimate benefit of all. She feels slighted that despite her pure and good intentions to create what she sees as positive health changes for the children, her advice is ignored, and she emphasizes that it is solely the Ethiopian parents who refuse to follow her important instructions. By seeing them as under her control, she infantilizes them, failing to fully recognize the parents' own agency.

Shoshana is an experienced kindergarten teacher. She explains in her written narrative the ways in which she is challenged by the refusal of a parent to follow her professional advice, in this case the referral of an Ethiopian child to an inclusive education committee for him to receive additional remedial teaching with a specialist.

I've been working with this population for 10 years already, and it is still hard for me to accept the reactions. Where does this resistance to receiving help come from? Even though I present it as a free gift that will truly help the child's progress. After that incident, I felt frustrated and unprofessional since I wasn't able to convince the parent when I saw how badly the boy needed help. When I asked that the parents come to the Inclusive Education Committee, so that the boy could receive professional help, they refused to cooperate. Even at the expense that he would not receive the help that he needs.

Shoshanna bears the burden of her inability to actualize her desire to help an Ethiopian child. However, she does not place the locus of blame on herself, but rather on the parents, because of their refusal to accept assistance. Throughout her 10 years of experience with this population, she has consistently found herself left on the sidelines, marginalized in her efforts to enact what she perceives as a kind, well-intentioned attempt to help. This is experienced as emotional hardship, and she and the parents remain distinct and oppositional entities. An ever-present lack of mutual trust has not dissipated despite long years of genuine effort and good intentions.

The missionary stance highlights the cultural gap between the teachers and the parents. We see from this pattern that in adapting an assimilationist approach to the integration of these children, the teachers themselves wind up feeling burdened with frustration as well as a sense of hardship which they are left to cope with on their own. The lack of mutual trust between teachers and parents is characteristic of the missionary approach.

3. Learning from cross-cultural encounters: "It was like rain on a summer's day."

A third approach which emerged from the data reflects an attitude of cultural sensitivity. Through experience-based practice, accompanied by emotional connections to the parents, teachers learn to find solutions to challenges as they arise. Rina writes of the preparations for the Chanukah celebration in the kindergarten, an occasion which she decides to use as an opportunity for multicultural inclusion. Her idea is that the Chanukah prayer should be recited by the parents, not only in Hebrew, as is customary, but also in the other two spoken languages of the parents:

The incident happened at Chanukah. It was my first year in the kindergarten, and I wanted to bring people together, to join hearts, and bring things together through something that unites all Israelis. At the Chanukah party, I decided that the blessing for lighting the Chanukah candles would be said in three languages: Hebrew, Russian, and Amharic (the Ethiopians' native language). I asked the Ethiopian parents [at the Chanukah party] to participate, and nearly everyone refused. I was shocked and I couldn't understand it, since it was such a nice gesture on my part. But I didn't give up and I called an "educational bridger" of Amharic, and she explained to me that most of the Ethiopian parents do not know how to read or write. I was even more

surprised, and I didn't know what to do, and the educational bridger said that she would help me and would write the blessing in Amharic and would also find out which of the parents do know how to read. In the end of the day, we found a father who said the blessing in Amharic. In that moment, I looked at the Ethiopian parents and saw pride and happiness on their faces; their faces glowed with joy. Even though afterwards no one told me how important it was to them to hear their language and to relate to their culture. In those moments, I felt great happiness overcome me and felt that I had done something holy and very important.

Rina, like the other teachers presented previously, also feels disappointed and frustrated when perceived good intentions cannot be actualized. However, unlike the two previous types discussed above, she does not remain paralyzed by bad feelings. She takes action, utilizing the resources available to her by turning to the appropriate person for advice, and thus creates an opportunity to resolve the misunderstanding.

The integrationist approach fosters a process of cultural understanding and cooperation which mutually benefits both the parents and the teachers themselves. While the teacher begins her account with feelings of frustration and shock, she prides herself on overcoming challenges and making a contribution to the community. Such a contribution is so fulfilling to her that she is able to cope without the explicit gratitude of the parents and enjoys a sense of pride.

Teachers who embrace such an approach not only learn to cope with challenges as they arise, but grow professionally from these experiences. Esther describes such an encounter:

I write messages to the parents via the children, to provide challenges for the children. I noticed that whenever I gave such a note to a particular Ethiopian boy, who was very bright, that he would throw the note on the floor or in the trash bin on his way out of the classroom. I was shocked the first time it happened. I couldn't understand why he would do such a thing, and since he avoided my question, I came to the conclusion that the boy has a behavioral problem. I called the educational bridger who speaks Amharic, to speak to his parents and clarify the issue. One day, during a conversation with the boy, I asked him again about the note. I was amazed by his answer; it was like rain on a summer day for me; I did not expect such a reaction from the child. When he spoke he had anger in his voice: "They don't read anyway!" I saw the frustration and disappointment on his face, and since then, whenever I send a note home, I read it aloud. I tell the children that they are grown up and that they also need to know what is written in the message. I succeeded in that the boy no longer throws the notes away, and he has become responsible in telling his parents the message. (uses Hebrew proverb: "I have learned more than all my teachers before me.")

The teacher combines empathy and creativity to generate an approach which reflects her educational awareness and sensitivity toward cultural differences, and which allows her to fulfill her desire to include Ethiopian children and their parents in the educational process.

Teachers thus have the ability to connect to their own emotions and use them as tools to learn and grow, creating a norm of cultural sensitivity in the classroom. When this process occurs, it is empowering; problems can be overcome, and the benefits are manifold.

The kindergarten teachers who participated in our study provided an insider perspective on the challenges and rewards of working with Ethiopian children, while focusing on the difficulties in relating to their families. Despite different attitudes ranging from patronizing to missionary, and finally an openness to discovering methods of cultural integration, the educators were all united by their impassioned reactions and emotional involvement.

Discussion

In our era of ever increasing globalization, educators are coping with the needs, challenges, and benefits of immigrant students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). The educator–parent relationship is one of the keys to successful integration of both the pupils and their family units within the educational setting.

The goal of the study at hand was to describe and analyze the accounts of the kindergarten teachers who participated in our study, depicting their challenges in working with Ethiopian children. It should be noted that the majority of the stories dealt with the characteristically frustrating nature of the teachers' relationships with the children's parents.

The narratives that were described and analyzed focus primarily on common day-to-day issues of the kindergarten, such as referral for remedial intervention and coping with tardiness. However, the kindergarten teachers often associate these issues with the specific Ethiopian cultural origin of the families. It may be that to some extent, the cognitive force of prejudice plays a role in the tendency to assign negative significance to anything that appears to deviate from the expected norm. In this particular case, not only are the children from an immigrant background, but they also represent the only Jewish sub-community that is racially and culturally African. However, it should be noted that educator–family relationships in general are often fraught with conflict (Lahman & Park, 2004), and the challenges described by Israeli kindergarten teachers are perhaps not unique to or specifically related to Ethiopian culture.

The quantity and intensity of emotion expressed in response to coping with immigrant-parental challenges is one of the main findings of the study. This element appears to connect the diverse patterns of behavior and expressions of the kindergarten teachers: Their strong emotional reactions ranged from feeling a need to distance themselves from the pupils, personal insult, anger, frustration, embarrassment, helplessness, and guilt to feelings of professional satisfaction, pride, and intense empathy. The intensity of the teachers' feelings may be proportional to the severity of the problems as they perceive them. Moreover, the intensity of

such emotion offers the teachers an opportunity to confront the experience of coping with otherness and the potential threat of the other (Zembylas, 2010). It may be that the "other" symbolizes the need for uncomfortable, uneasy change and for reevaluating the way that one has become accustomed to being in the world.

Foucault (1994) uses the term "ethics of discomfort" to explain the potential empowerment that a state of emotional discomfort can ultimately induce. The ethics of discomfort can and should be used as a tool among educators to enable them to view negative feelings toward immigrant children, such as the Ethiopian children and their families, not as a destructive, malevolent force, but rather as problematic emotions to be approached and faced without self-judgment.

The ethics of discomfort thus offers an opportunity for teachers to explore their assumptions about themselves to position themselves as witnesses to social injustice and not merely as observers and to be able to see their situation from different perspectives (Zembylas, 2010).

Furthermore, we find in our study that it is often the intense emotional involvement of the teachers which empowers them to undergo a process of positive change. Once our participants are able to connect to their own emotional experiences and feel empathy, they succeed in developing successful and creative solutions that bridge cultural gaps and give them a sense of great pride and satisfaction.

Recommendations for Teacher Education and Development

Based on the findings of our study, teacher education should be at the forefront of our efforts to improve the integration of immigrant children and their families within educational and cultural frameworks. It is early childhood educators who most often serve as the initial, formal face of the receiving society, and thus teachers have a particularly strong influence on the formation of the attitudes of the child and his family toward schooling, learning, and society.

Teachers' emotions should be emphasized as the fulcrum for changing attitudes, relations, and behaviors toward immigrant children. Such an approach should take priority over knowledge-based cultural diversity programs because it is empathy development which will serve as a chief force to connect families to the educational setting and to prevent marginalization. Thus, teachers should be exposed to the concept of the ethics of discomfort as a means of initiating reflection and personal transformation.

Furthermore, it is critical to enrich the understanding of early childhood educators with regard to the processes of discrimination and prejudice. Most significantly, it is important to make them aware that such feelings are part of human nature and should be evaluated holistically for both their potential dangers and their potential benefits in triggering positive change. This positive potential can be achieved not by

suppressing any such negative emotion, but rather by being in continual inner dialogue with these uncomfortable feelings.

The application of the aforementioned suggestions will provide teachers with the tools necessary to improve the relationship between the teachers and the parents of Ethiopian students, establishing a new foundation upon which to ameliorate the learning experience of the children from the very beginning of their education in the Israeli school system.

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