

The individuality-community axis

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This extract is from a tracer study⁷ of Almaya's Parents Cooperative Kindergarten, that was established for Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Some 70,000 Jews have reached Israel from Ethiopia since 1977. Their way of life there was so different that the adjustment process has been fraught with difficulties on all sides. The association now known as Almaya was set up in the early 1980s and has implemented programmes to reach all sectors of the community, including young children and their mothers. One of these was a Parents Cooperative Kindergarten for children aged 18 months to 4 years that operated in two neighbourhoods of Beer-Sheva. The kindergartens operated for five hours each day and were staffed by two paraprofessionals from the Ethiopian community with volunteer parents on a roster basis. The tracer study looked at how well former participants in the Parents Cooperative Kindergarten programme acquired many of the tools that are necessary to better integrate into Israeli society.

The Ethiopian and Israeli cultures have very different perceptions of human beings and their function in society. In Ethiopian society, the human being is a member of a group and a community, which are bound by a communal-traditional culture that reinforces 'togetherness' and does not encourage individuality.

Despite the changes that have taken place in the Ethiopians' society since the community migrated to Israel (primarily the break-up of the community structure and the extended family) the underlying forces that {traditionally} preserve the cohesiveness and structure of the community are still very strong.

Although Israeli society is extremely varied and is made up of different communities, the dominant theme is one of individualism, a perception that supports the development of the individual in the direction of maximum self-actualisation.

Unlike other children of Ethiopian origin of their age, the Parents Kindergarten children we studied displayed a distinct sense of self and a clear tendency toward individualism. The children perceived themselves as independent entities, and this perception was evident in a higher awareness of themselves, their ability to express emotions or a need for help,

and their ability to develop hobbies and talents that were theirs alone. The people around them reacted accordingly. The teachers of the Parents Kindergarten children viewed these children more clearly and less superficially than they did their peers. The Parents Kindergarten children were perceived as more dominant – children whose needs were clear – and there was a greater tendency to recommend – and integrate them into – the support programmes they needed.

Normally, Ethiopian parents tend to refer to their children as one entity – *them* – without relating to each child individually. A notable finding was that,

in addition to the Parents Kindergarten children showing a distinct sense of individuality, their parents, too, saw them as individuals, identifying unique elements in them, such as hobbies or ambitions for the future. These parents also seemed to perceive their children as being more responsible and delegated responsibility to them for performing tasks at home.

These differences should not be seen as a dichotomous division between the individual and the community, but rather as a shift in this axis. The Parents Kindergarten children were still less individualistic than Israeli children of the same age who are not of Ethiopian

origin (and not caught between two cultures), or immigrant children from the former Soviet Union who came from a society that is more similar to the host Israeli society from the standpoint of self-perception and individualism.

At the same time, the Parents Kindergarten children seemed to feel that they belonged to the Ethiopian community. They neither denied nor 'forgot to mention' their connection with the community, apparently seeing themselves as part of a large, supportive body, which for them constituted a kind of family. This could also mean that the content of their Ethiopian tradition and heritage was far more accessible to them.

What was it in the Parents Kindergarten that caused these differences in the children's self-perception? A look at the aims of Parents Kindergarten activities shows that in order to develop the child's discrete sense of self, the programme's creators seek to give the children the ability to express emotions and needs, and to develop a sense of independence and freedom of choice. Interviews with the founders of the

Parents Kindergarten and those who are involved in its work reveal a concrete picture of the application of these aims in the kindergarten.

Emotional expression

In interviews with the programme's coordinators and teachers, they said that as part of their work in the kindergarten, they address emotions and provide warmth, but above all, they work with the children on identifying and coping with their emotions. This is done, for example, by transparently saying to the child, 'You're angry because Danny took the toy.' or 'You're sad because your mommy hasn't come yet'.

Freedom of choice

One of the interviewees reported that, *in every activity in the kindergarten, the child has a choice*. The activities are structured and organised, but at the same time, the children are given freedom of choice. At the meal, the children have a choice of what they want to eat (rice or potatoes). The teachers have to build organised activities with a beginning, a middle and an end, but the children are never obliged to take part in the activity. They can choose whether they want to take

part in a creative activity or play, for example, in the dolls' corner. It is important to note that the programme supervisors describe intensive work with the counsellors (women of Ethiopian origin trained for work in the kindergarten) on this issue: not to force the children to do something simply because the group has a planned activity. This underscores the wide gap in the perception of a group acting together, even in kindergarten, where the individual does not have the ability to choose, in contrast to the Israeli reality for which the children are being prepared.

In the preschool itself, the counsellors talk to the mothers about their child's experience in kindergarten activities, emphasising each child's unique character. The children are given more attention and the parents see the results of this later at home. Interviews with Parents Kindergarten teachers and coordinators showed that the parents recognise the uniqueness of children who have participated in the Parents Kindergarten. The parents say that the kindergarten child is more developed than their other children, brings home paintings and drawings, and sings songs



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learnt in school. Sometimes the mother comes home from the kindergarten with her own impressions and shared experiences with her child, and this also sets the child apart in her view. The children's ability to develop a distinct perception of self is the result of a combination of two factors: the child's own experience in the kindergarten (designed to develop self-perception) and the parents learning to see the child's uniqueness, which enhances the process. ○

* Levin-Rozalis M & Shafran N: *A sense of belonging: a tracer study of Almaya's Parents Cooperative Kindergarten, Israel* (to be published 2003 as Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections No. 19).