

Ethiopian-Australian Students' Experience of Secondary Schooling in the Australian Education System in the State of Victoria

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at investigating the secondary school experiences of Ethiopian (Ethio)-Australian students living in Melbourne. A qualitative methodology was employed using interviews and observations as data collection instruments. Secondary school students, their teachers and parents acted as participants of the study. The findings of the study included a deeper understanding of the exclusionary forces that contributed to the students' attendance and learning in the secondary schools when they relocated between schools and countries. Based on the data collected and the analysis made, appropriate recommendations were forwarded to teachers, parents, schools and policy makers.

Background to the Study

Historical studies of education in Ethiopia indicated that the traditional education system of the country was religiously oriented; and the two institutions that monopolized the traditional education for centuries were the Orthodox Church (since the 4th century) and the Mosque (since the 16th century). The major objective of education in earlier times was to produce elites who could serve the Church, the Mosque and the State.¹ In fact, Church education in Ethiopia has pervaded the norms, values and culture of the existing society and it has been dominantly functioning until recently. Ethiopian Church education was (and still is) aimed at preparing priests, monks, deacons and teachers to serve in the Church's program. Church education, particularly in earlier days, was also expected to produce civil servants, such as judges, governors, scribes, treasurers and general administrators, since there was no other source of trained personnel. It aimed to produce passive, submissive, obedient adults who served both the State and the Church.²

The beginning of modern secular education in Ethiopia was associated with the opening of the first modern school in 1908 for the public. However, because of several factors, including large class size and the voluminous content that students were required to study each year, the methodology was teacher-centred. Instructional time was given mainly to teacher explanation of syllabus content, allowing little time for student participation in classroom

¹ Teshome (1979), Tekeste (1996).

² Tekeste (1996).

lessons. Although attempts have been made to improve the overall education system of Ethiopia in the last few decades, students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders still complain about the large class size (on average about ninety five students in one classroom for most suburban schools and cities), overcrowded curricula with a highly theoretical content, and teacher-centred learning with little student involvement.³ This, in turn, gave more room for teachers' authority, and the teaching process has continued to resemble previous religious preaching.

Since regional languages such as *Amharic*, *Oromigna*, *Tigrigna*, *Somaligna*, *Guragigna*, etc are used as media of instruction in primary schools of Ethiopia, students are expected to experience language problems when they arrive in Victoria. Even in secondary schools in Ethiopia where English is the medium of instruction, students in most cases are not given the opportunity to write essays and express themselves in English in the classroom because of teacher-focused process.

For students who now attend school in Victoria, having previously experienced the education system of Ethiopia, the impact of such methodology and religious-oriented school culture is significant. Ethiopian school culture is also influential for those students who did not attend school in Ethiopia as there is a likelihood that in their home life parents or other family members may have experienced their schooling in Ethiopia.⁴ This paper aims to investigate secondary school experiences of Ethiopian (Ethio)-Australian students living in Melbourne, exploring particularly what those students need in their schooling.

Research Questions

- What cultural differences affect their schooling?
- To what extent do the students' school experiences match their needs, interests and past experiences?
- What factors contribute to their school experience?

Research Design

A postcritical ethnographic approach designed within the qualitative research paradigm was used. The Ethiopian school and work experience of one of the authors helped to investigate the study from a "*native's point of view*" without imposing a personal conceptual framework.⁵ Basically, postcritical ethnographers aim to reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects by entering into first-hand interaction with the

³ Bitew (2008).

⁴ Lindo (2000).

⁵ Jones (2006: 321).

subjects in their everyday lives. They make a critical analysis of their data and show their positions in their findings. The current study adapted this approach in the school context. Semi-structured interviews with audio recording, participant observations and documents were used as data collection tools. Although students (and their parents) involved in the study came from a range of schools, two secondary schools (one Government and one Catholic) were chosen in Melbourne as the study setting for selecting teacher participants and for the purpose of the classroom observation. That is, the students were first chosen by snowball sampling from various schools of Melbourne and their teachers were selected randomly from the aforementioned two schools. A total of 36 participants (sixteen students, ten teachers and ten parents) were chosen for interview. Six of the parents were actual parents of six of the student participants; all of the interviewed teachers taught some of the student participants along with other Ethio-Australian students. A combination of narrative and thematic analyses were used. Finally, constructs were developed from the identified patterns of responses.

The sixteen student participants (eight male and eight female) were from years 9 to 12 and were between sixteen and twenty years old. Eight of them attended school in Ethiopia and the remainder did not. Five of the teacher participants were female. Out of the ten parent participants (four female and six male), four had a bachelor degree and above, one was a current university student, two had completed secondary school only and three did not report attending secondary school.

Findings

Based on the data collected from the participants in the interviews and observations as well as from the documents, the following findings are drawn. The word “participants” is used here to include all teacher, student and parent participants of the study unless otherwise specified.

Students’ School Experience in Relation to Cultural Difference

The presence of cultural difference between the students’ past and their current schooling was voiced by all participants but it was not considered to be a major factor impacting on academic success for most of the immigrant students who had lived here for more than four years. For instance, one student said “*because it is mixed and our school is not that big, ...I got familiarity with the different cultures easily*” (female, year 9 student). One teacher also suggested that “*cultural difference ... only lasts for a short period*” (female, year 11 teacher). A second teacher expressed his opinion by stressing the presence of cultural difference but also the tremendous effort made by the students to reduce its effect on their learning, adding “*they are fitted very well into this society*” (male, year 9 teacher).

On the other hand, recent arrivals and some students from traditional, “rigid” families who had been here for a long time considered that cultural difference acted as a main constraint in their school success, including the development of social relationships. The shy, polite, passive and submissive culture of their past was reported repeatedly to be a factor interfering with these students’ schooling success. In line with this, much of the literature in explaining *cultural difference theory* comments that a difference between the school culture and the immigrant students’ home culture can affect their learning and thereby their educational performance.⁶

The clash between students’ home culture and the culture they experienced with friends in school was described in different ways by participants. Some students reported that in attempting to balance these different aspects they faced problems both at school and at home in doing some activities. The responses of the participants showed that the majority of students in the study were in between two different cultural practices and mentalities, conforming with the findings of Zusho and Pintrich concerning immigrant students in general.⁷ Lindo and Hourahan have remarked that the problem of such cultural adjustment was a major contributor to the academic problems of immigrant students.⁸

Findings also indicated that many of the students, especially recent arrivals, felt that other students and some teachers lacked awareness of their culture which led the latter to misunderstanding and even mistreatment of these students. In line with this, one mother who was a participant of Batrouney’s study said “*teachers who have understanding of African culture treat them [African immigrant children] reasonably*”.⁹ Rong and Preissle supported this idea, noting that teachers who had experience of teaching immigrant students and who knew their students’ culture adjusted their lesson design, teaching strategies, testing and homework assignments to suit the immigrant students’ needs and past experience.¹⁰

Students used different mechanisms to manage the cultural differences they faced at school. These included talking to other people such as family members and friends about their experiences; reading books and magazines to learn about the new things and then attempting to adapt themselves; discussing an issue with the concerned person when misunderstanding occurs; practising

⁶ For example: CRC (2006), and Erickson (1987) and Trueba (1988) as cited by Rong and Preissle (1998).

⁷ Zusho and Pintrich (2003).

⁸ Lindo (2000); Hourahan (2000).

⁹ Batrouney (1991: 65).

¹⁰ Rong and Preissle (1998).

presentations to overcome their shy character and attain their academic expectations.

Ethio-Australian students were engaged in different types of school activities in Melbourne secondary schools, which helped them to gain a variety of school experiences. Among the most common positive school experience was the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills in explaining ideas, the development of time management and punctuality, and the shaping of attitudes on gender issues and on a sense of responsibility. These, and other experiences, were gained by students through their interactions with curriculum materials, the teachers' specific methods of teaching, as well as interaction with peers, teachers and other school staff and with the school environment in general. When describing the experience of time management and punctuality, for example, one student said, assignments "*have due dates. If you do not submit the assignments in the due dates, you do not get the marks you deserve*" (male, year 11 student).

Some of these experiences were specific to these Ethiopian students because they felt a need to change or modify their Ethiopian tradition of passivity in class and the stereotypic roles for boys and girls. Those students who had attended school in Ethiopia and entered school in Melbourne recently found the opportunity of expressing themselves in class to be a new and positive school experience. However, it was noted that the transition from their past school experience to the new was not smooth. The process of adapting to the new classroom culture took a considerable time and was still considered a challenge for some of them.

Students gained several other positive school experiences from their relationship with peers and teachers. Amongst these were learning the social and cultural norms, values and "right" ways of expressing feelings in the new peer group contexts; resolving conflicts positively; performing better in class and other school activities, and understanding one's rights and responsibilities clearly. The first of these experiences especially demanded they make changes from their previous cultural expectations. The way they exchanged greetings in the classroom with their peers, the level of respect they provided to teachers and other social and cultural norms were very different from their previous culture, a factor experienced also by one of the authors (Ethiopian) in his previous European and current Australian classroom experience. Asking questions in the middle of lessons without an invitation from the teacher is thought to be impolite in most Ethiopian classrooms, a point that requires time and understanding to overcome. Learning such new practice generally helps with socialization in the new classroom situation. However, it was found that students' involvement in some school activities including extra-curricular

activities was affected by the students' economic status, their language skill, and the encouragement given by teachers and other school staff. For instance, teacher participants commented that most Ethio-Australian students come from working families who have relatively less money to pay for club membership fees and for school excursions. Many parent and student participants also mentioned that financial problems are a major hurdle for this group of students which limits them in experiencing several school and out-of-school activities. Although this problem is expected to be common for many other Australian students, most of the Ethiopian parents, especially recent arrivals, struggle with resettlement issues, which adds a burden to their already weak financial situation. This inhibits them to have extra money for their children's school-related fees.

Factors Contributing to Students' School Experience

Students' best school experiences were mainly related to teachers' caring character, the help that teachers offered and effective methodology. Other factors contributing to students' best school experience were small class size, supportive social interaction, the availability of facilities, and the relationship with, and maturity level of, their peers. Class size and the availability of facilities were seen to be better here than in the Ethiopian classroom situation and contributed much to the students' best school experience. Conversely, students disliked their school experience when it was associated with unorganized, discouraging and careless teachers. Teachers were the source of both the students' best and worst school experiences. As Ethiopian culture includes a large role for elders, including teachers, to be highly 'protective' of children, Ethio-Australian students expected teachers to be caring. Additional factors that contributed to students' worst school experience were language limitations, noisy classrooms, meeting peers with addictions or bad behaviour, bullying and racist attacks.

Bullying and racism were mentioned repeatedly by participants. As the students were from various schools in Melbourne, their responses indicated that boys encountered more bullying and racist attacks than girls, and students in government schools that did not have a multicultural mix faced more bullying and racist violence than students in Catholic, religious, schools. Students at lower secondary year levels were also more victimized by bullying and racist aggression than students at upper secondary levels. Although bullying was a common experience for many school students irrespective of their immigration history, the frequency and severity of the incidence, for the current group of students were high. These students were identified and picked on easily by their skin-colour and were seen by other students as culturally different. Teacher participants explained that when these students faced bullying and discrimination, the students got annoyed easily, felt helpless, and sometimes this had an impact on their perception about other people which, in turn, affected their classroom behaviour. A similar research study suggests that Ethiopian Australian students feel racism and discrimination practices

associated with being “black” keenly because Ethiopia had no history of colonization and had never experienced colour discrimination.¹¹ Several studies conducted in Australia on African immigrant students showed the presence of bullying, racist violence and harassment in secondary schools.¹² Other recent researchers also revealed similar racist experiences against some African communities,¹³ including Ethio-Australians.¹⁴

Students also reported different patterns of school experience dependent on their length of time in Australia. Although almost all participants faced problems with English language for the first few years of schooling, recent arrivals in secondary schools struggled greatly with language, creating a great barrier for academic success and the development of peer relationships. The language problem was a determinant factor in student participation in different school activities, classroom discussions and socialization in school in general. Corroborating this, the report of the Community Relations Commission (CRC) for New South Wales suggested the need to consider the resourcing of further intensive English provision to immigrant students. The report, quoting Coffs Harbour City Council (CHCC), added that “*students are only provided with 6 month English learning tuition. For students who have never spoken English, have had extremely limited, if any, education previously, this is not sufficient to meet their needs*”.¹⁵

Another factor affecting students’ school experience was their previous academic background. A considerable number of them had come from refugee camps. They had then stayed in language centres for only six months, and often had a limited previous academic background in regular classrooms. This was perceived by participants to have contributed to students’ problematic school experience and a relatively low academic achievement here.

Placement of students in the different year levels based on their age on arrival in Australia was highly criticized by parents and students as it did not take into account their limited academic background. This problem, in addition to language limitations, was considered a big hurdle for academic progress, future learning opportunity, school attendance and self- esteem. The problem of placement was highlighted in the reports of the African Think Tank (ATT) and the CRC, and in Batrouney’s study of Africans in Victoria, which noted the complaints of immigrant parents in placing their children on the basis of

¹¹ Klein (2002).

¹² [Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW /CRC/](#) (2006), Cahill (1996).

¹³ Narchal (2006).

¹⁴ Klein (2002).

¹⁵ CHCC as quoted in CRC (2006: 92).

age rather than that of their previous schooling.¹⁶ The same problem was also raised repeatedly by participants in the current study as a cause for some students' despair in learning, as they found the lessons, especially in years 11 and 12, too difficult to cope with. This was also mentioned as a contributory factor to poor school attendance of some students. In connection with this, although attendance for the majority of students was reported by participants as high, a considerable number had a problem with attendance and/or punctuality in the classroom. It seemed that few parents knew of or reacted to this problem. Many teacher and student participants related poor attendance to students' economic problems and a resultant inclination to work part time, which in turn distracted their attention from learning.

Most of the parents had no contact with their children's school. However, it was reported by the majority of participants that parents gave high value to education and they wanted their children to attend not only secondary school but also to progress to higher education. In spite of parents' aspirations, the majority of students did not get academic support from their parents, often because of the parents' own limited educational experience, low socio-economic status or lack of time. The results showed a strong link between the level of parental academic support for their children and their own academic background. Allen and Kickbusch found from their extensive research study that students who were most successful academically tended to have parents who were demanding and who were actively involved in the education of their children.¹⁷ A similar finding was reported in the USA by Niehbur, as cited by Halawah.¹⁸

A considerable number of students preferred the Catholic/private schools compared with government schools in Melbourne because of their perceived better facilities and discipline. The classroom observations of the students' experience in the two selected schools also confirmed this result. For instance, the observed classrooms of the Catholic school had better facilities, and students' classroom discipline was far better in the Catholic school compared to the classrooms in the observed government school. However, some students warned against Ethio-Australian students choosing Catholic/private schools unless their financial situation is good enough to fulfil needs compatible with the status of other students in the same school, to protect them from a resultant feeling of inferiority.

¹⁶ African Think Tank (2008); CRC (2006); Batrouney (1991).

¹⁷ Allen and Kickbusch (2005).

¹⁸ Niehur (1995). Halawah (2006).

Student School Experience vis-à-vis their Needs, Interests and Past School Experience

Curricular Practices

Most of the curriculum content was reported by all participants as relevant and in line with the needs and future career interests of the majority of the students. However, the curriculum at years 11 and 12 was found to be relatively inflexible concerning the needs and academic ability of, particularly, recently arrived students. Incompatibility of the school curriculum with immigrant students' previous academic background was also mentioned by Olsen and Jaramillo, Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock, and in the CRC report as a major problem for the schooling of many immigrant students including Africans.¹⁹ Other research findings suggest that the content of the curriculum should be appropriately challenging if we want our students to get the best out of their school learning.²⁰

The majority of participants also believed that the curriculum failed to consider the students' home culture. Berumen, writing about Chicano experience in Californian high schools, has strongly asserted the need to include immigrant students' previous experience and culture in the school curriculum. Failing to do so, he notes, has caused immigrant students to dislike their school experience and thereby to drop out of school.²¹ Similar recommendations were made in the conference report of the African Think Tank, which stressed that the curriculum needs to be "*flexible and responsive to students' needs,... and considering the culture of origin and learning style and the complexities of African cultural diversity...*".²²

Pedagogical Practices

Most students were found to be more comfortable copying lessons down from the board, reading comprehension questions, working independently, in pairs or in small groups. They wanted to get regular comments as a correction response to their work. However, the majority of the students were not comfortable with group and whole class discussions, conversation and speaking in front of the class. This was found to relate to their limited language skills and traits from their traditional home culture, particularly their shyness in speaking in public. The literature suggests that the problem of new language and its consequence, the lack of courage to voice one's opinions, was

¹⁹ Olsen and Jaramillo (2000); Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2002); and CRC (2006).

²⁰ Svinicki (2005); National Academy of Sciences (2004).

²¹ Berumen (2004).

²² ATT (2007:21).

common to most immigrant students, especially those who come from non-English speaking backgrounds.²³

Students learned better and were more interested when teachers explored and used students' understanding and experiences as a base of learning, and when teachers stressed the link between lesson content and the experience of their daily lives. This tendency of relating theory to practice is, in fact, one of the key principles of learning.²⁴ Almost all students were happy and understood lessons well when their teachers gave detailed explanations and examples, demonstrated a theory by experiments; provided good handouts, and when they were involved in question and answer sessions, observing real scenes related to the lesson, and were engaged in practical activities. They also liked to get one-to-one help at their desk. Some of these preferences, for example liking to have more teacher explanations in lessons, are a consequence for those students who attended school in Ethiopia of their past school experience. Familiarity with the Ethiopian teacher-centred lessons encouraged some students to listen and learn more from the teachers' explanation than from discussion or group work. The students' preference for one-to-one help was also related to their need for more explanation about specific concepts. Their language limitations, especially, obliged them to seek more help and use more time to understand a concept.

Summary: What Particular Things Do Ethiopian-Australian Students Need?

In the interviews, students were encouraged to explain what they need in their schooling for better learning and the majority of them suggested effective lessons, caring teachers, proper discipline, etc. Most of the teacher- and parent-participants emphasised the need to provide for students:

- proper counselling and advice in every aspect of their school life
- more encouragement and push towards learning;
- appropriate support and advice in subject selection; and
- consistent supervision by adults especially after-school; otherwise, they may follow persons with bad behaviour and may get involved themselves in alcohol and drugs. A teacher participant explained his experience of one student of the group who seemed to be following this pattern and who gave little concern for his schooling. This student was of good character at the beginning but was not attended by family members after-school and developed bad habits later.

²³ Gao (2000), Olsen and Jaramillo (2000).

²⁴ Korthagen and Kessels (1999), Orland-Barak and Yinon (2007).

Providing such kinds of help and follow-up was considered by the participants to be a better means of filling the gap between their previous, or limited, school experience and their current schooling. From one of the authors' Ethiopian experience, and from some of the discussion in the previous section, the students' home culture did not encourage them to practice decision-making and taking responsibility. When the students were left to work alone with little supervision, guidance and encouragement at school, they got confused and easily distracted from their learning. Other specific needs were also mentioned by some teachers, such as the students need to practice more spoken English language in order to carry out the required learning activities of their lessons.

Conclusion and Implications

The Ethiopian students' school experience was found to be mainly a story of success but with a considerable number of basic things needed for improvement. Although the students' school experience was reported as matching their needs and interests, a considerable part of it was not found to be in line with their past experiences.

Students gained a wide experience in Australian schools, mostly pleasant and sometimes not. The availability of better facilities and small class sizes, compared favourably to Ethiopian schools, and the help they got from the majority of their teachers contributed to the students' success. Language limitations and cultural barriers, especially for recent arrivals; placement at school; lack of appropriate academic and financial help at home; the sudden increase of the difficulty level of the subjects at year 11 and 12 contributed for their problem. Though the positive school experiences were encouraging and helped students to progress in their learning, the negative ones such as racism and bullying were bottlenecks. The implication of this is that the students have to efficiently use the opportunity of positive school experiences, and the schools to consider the cultural and curricular impacts upon students' learning for a better result.

Recommendations

- Providing intensive language support for new arrivals beyond the initial six months language training period, improving language centre processes according to the needs of the students, and providing an on-going language support through the ESL program.
- Changing the placement policy to allow students entering mainstream schools in Australia to be placed in year levels compatible with their previous academic experiences rather than their chronological age. Alternative placement options may need to be considered if the academic level and age discrepancy is great.

- Making room in the school curriculum for some inclusion of the students' previous culture so that teachers and other students would know Ethio-Australian students better. This might also reduce misunderstanding and mistreatment that the Ethiopian students perceived in their schools, and may minimize bullying and racist violence since it would inculcate respect of other cultures.
- Facilitating better communication with parents by sending staff to places where the parents can be easily found, for instance, to their churches, mosques and other community centres, and discussing their problems and the possible mechanisms to improve the students' learning.
- Allowing students with outstanding financial problems to have free participation in different extracurricular activities.
- Providing additional training for teachers concerning the previous background and culture of Ethiopian students.
- Encouraging teachers to make the necessary effort in encouraging and including these students in their lessons.
- Requesting or encouraging parents to be more flexible in their child-rearing traditions in allowing their children to participate in different out-of-school activities while still maintaining a proper and close follow-up of students' school and after-school activities.
- Arranging ongoing discussion forums for parents on relations with, and management of their children at a time of a cultural clash between school and home. Community leaders, school staff and other concerned bodies should be involved in such forums.

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