

Abstract

Title: Learning-In-Context: An Ethnographic Investigation of Mediated Learning Experiences among Ethiopian Jews in Israel

Keywords: Learning differences, cognitive styles, cultural differences, school success (achievement), group-based inequalities in scholastic progress; special education, cognitive anthropology, individual learning dispositions, interpersonal interaction, institutional culture of school, identity, meaning, cultural tracking, assimilation, intercultural mediation, multicultural education, integration, MLE.

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This study adopts an integrated socio-cultural and historical theoretical framework and a three-tiered analysis in order to explore 'group-based inequalities' in scholastic achievement. The three levels of analysis are: (1) individual, focusing on knowledgeability of individual actors based on aptitudes, motivation and personal histories; (2) inter-individual, focusing on microlevel social interaction, interpersonal interaction, classroom interactions, peer group relationships and other dynamics of daily life; and (3) institutional/ communal, focusing on social structure, laws, norms, policy, cultural systems, ethnicity, religion, power discourse, history. The levels concern the issue of agency and structure in social science. Primacy was not given to any one level in the analysis.

The investigation focuses specifically on Ethiopian Jews who are living in Israel and has used an ethnographic approach in order to show how the *home environment* of Ethiopian students –including literacy events, typical modalities of parent-child interaction, socialisation practices, theories of child development, 'indigenous' conception of ideal child and intelligence – mismatch the *institutional culture of school* in Israel. The depressed economic condition of the Ethiopians, coupled with an insensitivity to their cultural baggage and meaning systems has been a significant inhibitor to academic progress. Issues of identity, alienation, personal and social meaninglessness etc., which have evolved from two conflicting and competing cultural (meaning) systems, are contributing to delay participation in academic and other walks of life.

Of particular importance is the practice of cultural tracking in schools and the basic programming for assimilation which have considerable implications for the progress of learning and development. The subtle workings of the institutional culture of school is one ingredient in the causal matrix responsible for the problem. Some students "learn" to become "failures" by the very processes which are supposed to educate them. It is the school which most directly and strongly reflects society's failure, as it is the one institution that has opportunities to directly affect the situation. The study suggests, among other things, a genuine intercultural mediation within a multicultural education that goes beyond emphasising just diversity and pluralism is required in order to sufficiently challenge the present foundations of the educational enterprise which are so thoroughly tainted by Euro-centric cultural biases, dominance and hegemony. This can be achieved by infusing the core concepts of an education which celebrates diversity and inter-culturalism throughout the entire curricula of all schools.