



The Ethiopian National Project (ENP) in Israel: The SPACE Scholastic Assistance Program – 2018-19 Matriculation – and the Bridge to America Pilot, 2020-21

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The Ethiopian National Project (ENP) in Israel is a partnership between the Jewish Federations of North America (JNFA), the government of Israel, representatives of Ethiopian Jewish community organizations, the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel (JDC-Israel), and Keren Hayesod-UIA. The Bridge to America: I Have a Dream (2020-21) Program is a partnership between the ENP and the Office of Public Diplomacy, U.S. Embassy Israel .

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Abstract

Background

The School Performance and Community Empowerment (SPACE) Program by the Ethiopian National Project (ENP) has been offered since 2005 to Ethiopian-Israeli students in junior-high and high schools. Since the 2016-17 schoolyear, it has been offered to other students as well. The program is designed to improve students' matriculation scores through scholastic assistance and socio emotional support. In the 2018-19 schoolyear, 870 12th graders participated, representing 22% of Ethiopian-Israeli 12th graders in Israel. The SPACE Program has also initiated a pilot called Bridge to America: I Have a Dream, for improving spoken English skills among 40 of its students.

Objectives

Examine the achievements of the Ethiopian- and non-Ethiopian-Israeli 12th-grade students participating in the SPACE program in 2018-19 as reflected in their matriculation exam achievements, and assess the impact of the program on the achievements of the Ethiopian-Israeli 12th-grade program participants. An additional objective was to learn about the implementation of the Bridge to America pilot and its contributions as perceived by the classroom teachers and educational instructors.

Methods

The evaluation was based on an analysis of data from the matriculation results files that appear in the Ministry of Education's virtual research room, for the period July-September 2021. The impact of the program on the scholastic achievements of Ethiopian-Israeli participants was examined by comparing the achievements of participating and non-participating student similar in their personal and school characteristics, using the nearest neighbor analysis method, as well as comparing the standardized MEITZAV (Growth and Effectiveness Measures (GEMS)) scores of students tested in eighth grade. In addition, we used telephone interviews (June-August 2021) to collect qualitative information from four teachers participating in Bridge to America and from two educational instructors in the schools where this pilot is implemented. The interviews were analyzed based on content categories and according to the research questions. Finally, in order to gain deeper insights, we held conversations with program managers in the ENP main office to learn about the program early on, as well as while formulating our findings.

Main Findings

As in previous years, the findings for 2018-19 indicate a high level of scholastic achievements among program participants. For example, the program had a marked positive impact on the percentage of students who achieved a full matriculation certificate. The percentage of Ethiopian-Israeli program participants eligible for a matriculation certificate was higher than among total students in the Hebrew education system. This achievement is particularly due to the high ratio of girls entitled to a full matriculation certificate. The gap in eligibility for a high-quality matriculation certificate that meets university enrollment prerequisites, and in the rate of students taking English and mathematics examinations at a high level (4-5 study units), has narrowed over the years but has not completely disappeared.

The impact of the program in 2018-19 is also evident in the percentage of students eligible for a full matriculation certificate. This effect is most evident among the female participants, among Ethiopian-Israeli students, and among students whose 8th-grade MEITZAV scores were in the medium range. In 2018-19, no impact was found on the percentage of those entitled to a high-quality certificate.

The teachers participating in Bridge to America and the educational instructors in the communities where the program is active expressed high satisfaction with the program. They feel the program makes a significant contribution to the participating students, both in improving their English conversation skills and in socio emotional aspects. The interviewees further suggest the need for clearer structuring of the annual curriculum required of the teachers – in terms of goals and success indicators – as well as for including the teachers in the structuring processes and their rationale. The teachers have also expressed the need for peer learning among the teaching staff for the purpose of mutual assistance and enrichment.

Summary and Recommendations

The achievements of program participants are high. Most graduated high school entitled to a full matriculation certificate, and about half graduated with one that meets university enrollment prerequisites. The percentage of those entitled to a full certificate from among the Ethiopian-Israeli participants is higher than among the total Hebrew education system population. These achievements are particularly impressive considering the weaker scholastic and personal background of program participants compared to the general Jewish population. Given the differential impact of the program on student groups, it is necessary to identify the source of the gaps and provide a tailored solution for each group. In addition, to strengthen the program's impact to ensure the attainment of high-quality

certificates enabling university enrollment, additional ways to support the students must be found to increase the rate of those taking English matriculation exams at the highest level.

Teachers appear to be satisfied with the Bridge to America Program, believing its contribution is important. They also consider it important to promote activities that will help them optimize their work, such as stating clear objectives, deeper acquaintance with the program contents and goals, and reliance on peer learning to enrich lesson programs.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Ethiopian National Project (ENP) was established in 2004. It is designed to enable Ethiopian-Israeli youth to maximize their potential and increase their opportunities for social mobility and future job market integration. The project includes a variety of interventions, the most significant being the ENP SPACE (School Performance and Community Empowerment) program, which offers scholastic and socioemotional assistance. The program was first implemented in 2005 among Ethiopian-Israeli junior high and high school students, with the goal of improving their achievements in matriculation exams by providing scholastic assistance and addressing emotional and social difficulties. The school principals select the students who will participate in the program according to their needs, on condition that they are not receiving scholastic assistance from any other program.

In 2016-17, there was a change in the program's operating strategy, in light of the government policy of integrating Ethiopian-Israelis into Israeli society ("A New Way"), aimed at reducing the extent of programs provided exclusively to Ethiopian-Israelis. Since then, the SPACE program has included students at a ratio of 80% Ethiopian- to 20% non-Ethiopian-Israelis in every locality where the program is implemented, and in the program as a whole.

This report presents the achievements of SPACE participants in the 2018-19 schoolyear in terms of matriculation scores and the program's impact thereon, as well as information about the Bridge to America: I Have a Dream pilot, implemented for the first time in 2020-21 to improve English-speaking skills among ninth graders participating in SPACE. The information was collected by interviews with teachers participating in the program as well as educational instructors coordinating the SPACE Program.

Objectives and Research Question

The evaluation study is divided into two distinct parts, each with its own objectives, and each intended to study a different aspect of the SPACE Program.

Part 1: Analysis of the achievements in the matriculation exams. The goal of this part of the evaluation was to examine, upon the completion of the matriculation exams, (a) The scholastic achievements of the both Ethiopian- and non-Ethiopian-Israeli 12th-graders students participating in SPACE in 2018-2019; and (b) The program's impact on those achievements – in order to arrive at insights that will help program managers to optimize their offerings.

Part 1 was guided by three main research questions:

- What were the characteristics of the program participants?
- What were the students' achievements in the matriculation exams?
- To what extent did the program affect the students' achievements in the matriculation exams?

Part 2: Interviews with teachers participating in Bridge to America and with educational instructors in the localities where the program is implemented. The goal of this part of the evaluation was to ascertain the teachers and educational instructors' perceptions of the implementation of Bridge to America and its contribution to improving participant achievements, as well as to raise key issues related to the pilot's implementations. The key research questions were:

- What do the pilot's goal as perceived by the teachers and instructors?
- What are the characteristics of participating students?
- What is the pilot's effect on and contribution to the participating students as perceived by the teachers and instructors?
- How is the program implemented and would the teachers and instructors like to change anything in the way it is implemented – why and how?

Methods

For the purpose of the evaluation, we used Ministry of Education national data on all students in Israel – Ethiopian-Israelis and non-Ethiopian-Israelis alike – as they appear in the Ministry's virtual research room. This room makes databases available to researchers, including files on schools, students' matriculation exams, and MEITZAV tests designed to measure school efficiency and growth.

For the data analysis, the identity numbers of the participants who were in 12th grade in 2018-19 were collected and coded by the Ministry and then transferred to the virtual research room where the analysis was conducted. The participants' achievements were analyzed using the SPSS program, and

differences between the groups were examined using accepted statistical tests. The program's impact on Ethiopian-Israeli students used a comparison group identified in retrospect out of the Ministry's student file, according to both school and personal characteristics included in the file. For each Ethiopian-Israeli program participant, another Ethiopian-Israeli student with similar personal and school characteristics was matched, who did not attend a school participating in the program. The matching was based on the nearest neighbor analysis method. The characteristics examined included gender, country of birth (Ethiopia/Israel); mother's education (none/ less than elementary/ elementary or junior high school/ high school and above); school characteristics (government Jewish/ government religious-Jewish); percentage of students entitled to a high-quality matriculation certificate out of all school students in 2018-19; and the school socioeconomic status indicator for the same year. The matching was on a 1:1 rate. One of the analyses also accounted for the 8th-grade national MEITZAV examination scores, and matched students according to prior achievement level as well. These analyses were conducted in July-September 2021.

The following were the indicators used to examine student achievements:

- Percentage of students entitled to a full matriculation certificate (hereinafter and above, "full certificate");
- Percentage of students entitled to a full matriculation certificate with at least four study units in English, hence meeting university enrollment prerequisites ("high-quality certificate");
- Percentage of students taking matriculation exams on a scale approaching certificate entitlement (the requirement for which is a total of 14 study units); and
- Percentage of students taking the English and mathematics matriculation tests on a level of 4-5 study units each.

The interviews with the teachers and educational instructors were held in June-August 2021; they were semi-structured telephone interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were four teachers (three women) and two educational instructors from the five localities where Bridge for America is active. The interview materials were analyzed based on the extraction of content categories and major themes based on the research questions. We also held conversations with the program management in the ENP main office, both early in the study in order to learn about the program and when finalizing the findings in order to deepen our understanding thereof.

Findings

SPACE Program

The 2018-19 academic year was the third in which non-Ethiopian-Israeli students participated in the program. In all, 870 12th-graders participate in SPACE in that year, of whom 75.3% were Ethiopian-Israelis. An examination of the characteristics of the students who participated and the results of the MEITZAV (GEMS) tests taken in 8th grade showed that all program participants – Ethiopian- and non-Ethiopian-Israelis – had similar scholastic backgrounds. All were found to have weaker backgrounds than those of students in Hebrew education as a whole, and their mean raw score was 37 points (compared to an average of 58.6 among all students in Hebrew education). The Ethiopian-Israeli students were characterized by a lower sociodemographic background than that of the non-Ethiopian-Israeli students participating in the program, reflected in the high percentage of mothers with elementary education or less (67.3% vs. 5.6%, respectively); the large number of children in each family (3.9 vs. 3.3, respectively); and the high percentage of immigrant students (48.4% vs. 6.0%, respectively).

In 2018-19, the 12th-grade students participating in the program accounted for 11.9% of all 12th-graders in the schools where the program was implemented. The non-Ethiopian-Israeli participants accounted for a minority (3.4%) of all the non-Ethiopian-Israeli students in those schools. Conversely, the Ethiopian-Israeli 12th graders participating in the program in 2018-19 accounted for 70.3% of all Ethiopian-Israeli students in schools where the program was implemented (lower than in the previous year, 2017-18, when 75% participated, but higher than in 2016-17 – 63.0%). The Ethiopian-Israeli participants accounted for 22.3% of all Ethiopian-Israeli 12th graders in Israel in 2018-19.

Analysis of the administrative data on the participants' matriculation results showed that in 2018-19, the achievements of all 12th-grade students who participated in the program (Ethiopian- and non-Ethiopian-Israelis alike) were higher than those of all students in Hebrew education (77.0% vs. 73.0%, respectively). These achievements are particularly noteworthy considering the relatively weak scholastic and personal backgrounds of the participants compared to those of the total students in Hebrew education.

When examining the results of only those Ethiopian-Israeli 12th graders who participated in the program in 2018-19, we see that the gap in eligibility for a full certificate between program participants and all students in Hebrew education was in the program participants' favor (76.9% vs. 73.0%, respectively). A gap in the same direction was found among the girls (81.8% vs. 72.5%, respectively), but not among the boys.

A gap was found in the percentage of students eligible for a high-quality certificate in favor of all students in Hebrew education compared to Ethiopian-Israeli participants (65.2% vs. 57.4%,

respectively) and, separately, among the boys (65.8% vs. 51.5%, respectively). Nevertheless, there was no significant gap among the girls, with the percentage of Ethiopian-Israeli participants with a high-quality certificate being similar to that of the general female student population in Hebrew education (62.0% vs. 64.7%, respectively). A similar trend was found in the percentage of students taking the high-level matriculation exams in mathematics and English (4-5 units): the gap in favor of general Hebrew education was found only among the boys (59.9% vs. 71.7%, respectively), whereas among the girls it was nonsignificant (66.8% vs. 68.2%, respectively). In both genders, there was still a significant gap in favor of general Hebrew education in the number of students taking the math exam at a high level.

Since 2008-9, there has been a growing increase in the percentage of students who qualify for a full and high-quality matriculation certificate, both among all Ethiopian-Israeli students and among those who participated in the program. To assess whether the high achievements of program participants in 2018-19 reflect the impact of the program, we isolated the impact of the program by means of a comparison group that was created retroactively. Analyses using this comparison group of similar students who did not participate in the program indicate that the program had a statistically significant impact on the percentage of those eligible for a full certificate, but not on those eligible to a high-quality certificate. Thus, it is evident that in the 2018-19 school year, the program managed to increase the percentage of participating students with a quality matriculation certificate, above and beyond the effects of other available programs benefitting similar students who are not taking part in this program. Finally, in examining the impact of the program on various population groups, the program was found to have a significant positive impact on eligibility for a full certificate both for girls and for students born in Ethiopia. Interestingly, when accounting for previous scholastic achievements, it appears that the program's impact on the eligibility to a full certificate is felt most strongly among students with medium previous achievements (as measured by the mean raw score of their 8th-grade MEITZAV tests).

The Bridge to America Pilot

The teachers and educational instructors interviewed reported that the Bridge to America pilot contributed to participating students both socioemotionally – in buttressing their confidence when conversing and speaking in front of an audience and in improving their social relations – and academically – in improving their English conversation skills, enriching their vocabulary, improving their reading and reading comprehension and enhancing their English grades at school. The interviewees said that learning in small groups and in a safe learning space promotes practice and an open and free conversation, contributing the enhancing the students' confidence in verbal expression,

particularly in English. Next to the scholastic contribution, the interviewees also attested to a social contribution, expressed in friendships and mutual support among the students.

The teachers and educational instructors also suggested that the expectations of the program managers and participating teachers need to be aligned, and that adjusted success indicators need to be determined, that account for the characteristics of participating students. According to the interviewees, most participants have medium-to-high English skills prior to joining it and this must be taken under advisement. Moreover, the interviewees suggested they wanted additional information about the program and greater involvement in decisions related to contents, to student selection and to lesson program planning. Finally, the teachers expressed their desire for peer learning for the purpose of mutual assistance and enrichment.

Summary and Recommendations

The achievements of program participants are high. Most have graduated high school eligible to a full matriculation certificate, and over half graduated with a certificate meeting university enrollment prerequisites. The percentage of those eligible to a full certificate from among Ethiopian-Israeli participants is higher than the average among the general Hebrew education students. This finding is particularly impressive given the weaker academic and personal backgrounds of program participants as opposed to the general Jewish student population.

Given the differential effect of the program on various student groups, we need to identify the source of the gap and provide a tailored solution for each group. Moreover, in order to enhance the program's effect on the eligibility for high-quality matriculation certificate enabling university admission, additional ways should be examined to support the students and thereby maximize the percentage of those taking high-level English examinations.

Apparently, the teachers are satisfied with the Bridge to America program, believing it makes an important contribution. However, the participant teachers also consider it important to take action to optimize their work, by setting clear objectives, improving their familiarization with the program contents and goals, and relying on peer learning to enrich lesson plans.