# Anthropology, Education and Multicultural Absorption Migration from Ethiopia to Israel

## Abstract

This paper presents a case-study which demonstrates the power of applied anthropology in combining theory with practice in the effort to change reality. Drawing on a multi-site ethnographic study conducted between the years 2005 and 2012, in each of the immigration journey’s stations – in Ethiopia (origin country) and Israel (destination country), this paper highlights the importance of applied anthropology insights in educational projects of immigration absorption.

This paper is based on the transnational paradigm, presenting immigration as a complex process, which is created via an ongoing discourse between countries, cultures, and people. It points out the importance of the immigration journey, its length and complexity, as well as its implications on the absorption and assimilation process of immigrants in their destination country. Focusing on the education aspect of absorption, this paper argues that beyond inter-cultural differences, absorption processes must also acknowledge the significance of the movement and journey in a dynamic reality. This paper is concentrated on a specific educational project, demonstrating how anthropological perceptions like doubting the obvious, heterogeneity, critical thinking and reflectivity can be used to change absorption policies. This paper shows how applied anthropology can translate immigration practices and insights into practical educational and absorption approaches.

Key words: Applied anthropology, Immigration, Absorption, Education, Transnational

## Introduction

Immigration and movement across continents and countries is a major force that shapes societies and policies. This paper is based on the transnational paradigm, presenting immigration as a complex process created via an ongoing discourse between countries, cultures, and people. It points out the importance of the immigration journey, its length and complexity, and its implications on the absorption and assimilation process of immigrants in their destination country.

The focus of the paper is the Matzofim program, designed to enhance and develop the academic skills of students from grades 1–9, with the aim of reducing gaps in language and mathematics among immigrant children from Ethiopia in Israel. The program combines academic skills with emotional processing of the Aliya process. It uses the children’s personal experiences and cultural elements, trying to facilitate their integration at school.

The children who participate in the program belong to the Zera Beta Israel (ZBI) community – Jews who had converted to Christianity and returned to Judaism during the 19th century. Their Aliya process to Israel started in 1991 and has continued ever since, from their villages to the transition camps in Ethiopia to immigrant centers in Israel, which are locally defined as “absorption centers,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and finally to their permanent residence. An average journey takes around 7–9 years (some have been waiting for 29 years), and many children were born on the move. The program was designed by the author, an applied anthropologist, as a way of improving the absorption and assimilation process of Zera Beita Israel.

The paper offers a new perspective on immigration as a complex process that includes movement between different stations over many years. It argues that projects designed for immigrants must refer not only to the source and destination countries but also to the different stations on the way. It challenges the classic view of immigration as a linear process between source and destination and presents a possible model for a program designed for immigrant children. While the paper focuses on a unique Israeli case study, this model may be adapted to suit other countries and immigrant populations.

## Theoretical Background: Applied Anthropology, Immigration and Education Systems

Anthropology is often considered a collection of curious facts, telling about the peculiar appearance of exotic people and describing their strange customs and beliefs. It is looked upon as an entertaining diversion, apparently without any bearing upon the conduct of life of civilized communities. This opinion is mistaken. More than that, I hope to demonstrate that a clear understanding of the principles of anthropology illuminates the social processes of our own times and may show us, if we are ready to listen to its teachings, what to do and what to avoid. (Boas, 1928)

Boas’ (1928) words underline the practical dimension of the anthropological discipline, which has developed over the years into a sub-discipline of applied anthropology. Applied anthropology is a complex of related, research based instrumental methods, which produce change or stability in specific cultural systems through data, direct action, and/or policy. This process can vary in terms of the problem, role of the anthropologist, motivating values and extent of action involvement (Van Willigen, 2002).

“Applied anthropology” was first described in 1941 with the creation of the Society for Applied Anthropology, which unites anthropologists committed to the “application of the principles, theories, methods and approaches of anthropology to the interdisciplinary identification and solution of human problems (Society for Applied Anthropology, n.d.).

Applied anthropology skyrocketed during World War II, when an estimated three-quarters of all American anthropologists contributed to the war effort; by mid-1943, “virtually every wartime agency had an anthropologist or two on staff” (Price, 2008: 37). Anthropologists took on many different roles during the war: they offered advice at every level of the government, were brought in for their specialized language skills, and devised plans to encourage soldiers—and countries—to surrender; others were spies, using ethnographic or archaeological fieldwork as a cover. This form of applied anthropology created new interest in the discipline. Applied anthropologists often offer a systematic understanding of different sub-cultures, thus helping policy-makers and government agents in their work (Kluckhohn, 2018). Scholars in this field also offer unique contributions and points of view in migration-related processes.

The growing phenomenon of people’s movement across continents and countries challenges the traditional nation-based discourse. The flow of capital, knowledge, and people and the gradual development of cross-border networks undermine the principle of the nation-state as the main organizational axis of economic, political, cultural, and social life (Castles and Miller 1998). According to the transnational approach, an immigration process is not a linear journey from the country of origin to the country of destination but a complex, ongoing and dynamic process, formed out of an endless dialogue between places and countries. While physical relocation might be a one-time event, cultural and social transformation is not. The physical territory is defined by borders, but it also includes cultural and social spaces interconnected and affected by different cultures and people and creating an array of meanings (Dinnerstein et al. 1990; Tilly 1990; Vertovec and Cohen 1999; Gold 2002; Levitt et al. 2003).

Education systems are challenged much the same way. Many nation-states operate a governmental education system in their official language, teaching unified versions of history, narrative and culture. The reality of immigration calls for a more multicultural approach that highlights the crucial contribution of different cultural communities and the right of individuals to lead a full, meaningful life while maintaining their unique culture and identity (Banks 1993; Walzer 1983; Taylor 1994). Systems are required to acknowledge simultaneous, non-consistent, changing and hybrid identities (McAndrew 2007; Bhabha 1994; Suarez-Orozco 2004). These trans-national identities allow easier movement between worlds and prepare young people for life as citizens of the world.

Immigrants often encounter challenges in education systems as a result of their difficulty with learning the native language (Guerrero 2004; Olsen 2000) and their ambivalent reception by the local community, school, teaching, staff, and fellow students (Gitlin et al. 2003; Lee 1996, 2005; Ong 2003). While most official school policies and teachers talk about welcoming migrants, their practices are often different. In the US, for example, many schools lack necessary English Language Learner (ELL) programs and qualified teachers (Gitlin et al. 2003), hold low expectations of migrant students (Suarez-Orozco 1989; Trueba et al. 1990), and fail to provide translation services for migrant parents at school events or parent-teacher meetings. The problems faced by migrant students and their families in US public schools often result in isolation and rejection, lower scores on standardized tests, higher drop-out rates, antisocial behavior and rejection by peers (Rong and Preissle 1998; French and Conrad 2001; Kirova 2001). Moreover, since cultural capital is context-dependent and cannot be fully transferred between societies, valuable familial cultural capital is often devalued following migration (Gonzales, & etc. 1992; Gang, and Zimmermann, 2000).

The current paper aims to add another layer to this picture of a complex relationship: that of the immigrants’ journey. In today’s world, immigrants often go through a prolonged journey across several stops before arriving at their final destination. This journey might affect the students’ absorption and assimilation in their new surroundings.

Different countries employ different types of immigrant absorption policies. The two most common models today are mediated absorption, where immigrants are required to go through absorption centers, like in Germany (Bendel 2014), and direct absorption, which allows immigrants to be integrated in society upon their arrival, like in France and the UK (Escafré-Dublet 2014). Each of these models has its own characteristics, advantages and disadvantages, and they are based, at least partially, on different perceptions of the concept of nation and culture. Education systems are divided similarly, some sending immigrant students to designated classes during their first few years in the country and others integrating them directly with local students.

In some countries, these models are applied selectively for different immigrants, based on their country of origin and number of immigrants (Essomba 2014). In Israel, for example, immigrants from Argentina or the United States make their own living arrangements and get absorption aid from the state. Their children are incorporated directly into classes with local students and get some extra Hebrew classes. Yet, immigrants from Ethiopia are sent into absorption centers, where they get housing assistance, language lessons and other services designed to help them acclimate. Their children study in designated classes for at least a year before being integrated into general classes and are offered after-school special classes at the absorption center.

Studies suggest that the migration experience creates a liminal space of “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that transmigrants often experience a disjuncture between “ways of being” and “ways of belonging,” i.e., their physical presence and actual social engagement are different from their sense of belonging and awareness of identity. The Olim in the absorption center are physically in Israel, but mentally and culturally they are still in Ethiopia (Author, 2018; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). They experience a liminal state in terms of their racial and ethnic identification. In this situation, migrants often encounter new mirror images ascribed by the receiving society and become reflexive about how to situate their personal and collective identities (Ahmed, 1999; Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001; Takeyuki, 2003). Scholars also debate whether transnational ties or multiple identities weaken immigrants’ integration in the receiving society or challenge the norm and practice of citizenship (Glick Schiller, 2005; Vertovec, 2001). The social field approach examines the identification of transmigrants in global, national, and local contexts simultaneously—how individuals negotiate their presence on different levels that are socially and geographically distant (Golob, 2014).

The current paper analyzes the absorption processes from the perspective of applied anthropology, offering different options for absorption, like integration, differentiation or assimilation. Applied anthropology combines academic research with actual engagement and involvement in different processes, allowing the applied anthropologist to ask questions and view reality from an alternative perspective. This in turn actively involves the anthropologist in changing reality based on their unique insights ([Delpit](https://journals-sagepub-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/action/doSearch?target=default&ContribAuthorStored=Delpit%2C+Lisa) 2006; Gonzalez 2004; Guerron-Montero 2002; Sillitoe 2007).

## Historical Background – Israel as an Immigrant State

The Jewish-Israeli society is an immigrant society, created mainly by waves of Jewish immigrants to Palestine, and later to the State of Israel, since the end of the 19th century. Zionist ideology described Jewish immigrants as *Olim* (“ascending”) and their act of immigration as *Aliyah* (ascension). These terms are still used in Israel, differentiating Jews immigrating to Israel from any “regular” immigrant who moves across countries. The *Aliya* process is based on a unique concept, where each *Oleh* gets state assistance in various fields, including housing, employment, health and education. This process is commonly described as “absorption” (*Klita*)—immigrants acclimate into their new environment and are absorbed by it.

As *Olim*, Jews are granted automatic citizenship upon their arrival. This process, however, might be more complicated for immigrants who are related to Judaism but sometimes are not recognized as Jews by the *Halacha*, the Orthodox Jewish law (for example, *Olim* from the FSU or Ethiopia). The right of Jews to immigrate to Israel is established in the Law of Return, derived from the definition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This law also defines who is considered a Jew for the purpose of *Aliyah*. Over the years, the Law of Return was expanded to include various regulations and interpretations like the Entrance Law or the Convert Impact (*Ger Gorer*), which allow non-Jews who are related to Judaism to immigrate to Israel under specific conditions, but the right to Israeli citizenship is still based on the notion of Israel as a Jewish state.

The melting pot paradigm was a basic principle in the establishment of the Israeli public. As part of this paradigm, *Olim* from around the world were expected to give up their former identities and adopt a new, local identity, which would bridge gaps between ethnicities. This paradigm also formed a definition of Otherness, which included negative perceptions and stereotypes of immigrants in general, and particularly those of African descent. Today, Israel employs a more multi-cultural approach, which encourages dialogues between various cultural groups. Yet, *Aliyah* absorption systems still expect the *Olim* to be assimilated into society, leave their culture behind and adjust to their new environment.

The program described here reflects a partial change of perception of the absorption centers, striving for more dialog and integration and less assimilation.

### Ethiopian *Aliyah* to Israel – Beita Israel and Zera Beita Israel (Falashmura)

The religious identity of Jews in Ethiopia was developed separately from the rest of the Jewish world and was inherently immersed in the Ethiopian culture and beliefs (Corinaldi 1998). The earliest testimonies of Beita Israel (BI) as a Jewish community in Ethiopia are from the 14th century. During the 19th century, some converted to Christianity but maintained their linkage to Beita Israel and were commonly defined as Zera Beita Israel (ZBI, also known as *Falashmura*. See: Author 2011; Waldman 1995; 2015; Seeman 2009; Shabtay 2006, Salamon 1993, Author 2014a; 2014b). While BI were recognized as Jews and approved for *Aliyah* in 1973, the issue of the ZBI community has been in constant dispute. In a decision by the Israeli Supreme Courte, they were described as:

Ethnically related to the Jews of Beita Israel, who converted to Christianity due to specific circumstances of time, place and environment. Yet, they maintained their uniqueness, partly due to the distinctions and aversions of their non-Jewish surroundings. Now, they wish to return to their Jewish identity and immigrate to Israel (Supreme Courte Decision 3317/93).

*Olim* from ZBI started coming to Israel in 1993 and still come when permitted by the State of Israel. Most of the *Olim* from this community are authorized to make *Aliyah* due to their familial ties to Ethiopian Jews from BI or ZBI community.

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 148,700 Jews of Ethiopian origin lived in Israel as of 2017. Of these, 61,700 were born in Israel, and 87,0000 were born in Ethiopia. About 55% belong to the ZBI community. Most have first-degree relatives who have been waiting in Ethiopia for *Aliyah* permits, some for over 20 years. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, about 8,000 people are still waiting for *Aliyah* permits in Ethiopia.[[2]](#endnote-1)

### Israel’s Absorption Policy: Absorption Centers

The State of Israel and its education system employ a unique, mediating policy with regards to Ethiopian *Olim*, reflected, among other things, in the absorption centers.[[3]](#endnote-2) Officially, the goal of the absorption centers is fairly simple and straightforward – helping the newcomers assimilate into the local society. The execution, however, is complicated, reflecting a dialogue between cultural orientation and therapeutic approaches; between cultural acceptance of *Olim* and trying to “normalize” them, pushing them to adapt to local norms; between partnership and empowerment on one hand and control and subordination on the other.[[4]](#endnote-3)

Absorption centers are newcomers’ first encounter with Israel. The *Olim* live in the center and get support in a variety of fields like education, health, culture, employment, and more, with the goal of helping them adapt to their new life. Every center employs a professional team of social workers, culture coordinators, housekeepers, counselors, translators and mentors. *Olim* from the ZBI community usually live in the absorption center for eighteen to twenty-four months, studying Judaism, Hebrew, and other necessary skills. Children in the absorption center study in local schools during the morning, usually in separate classes (at least during their first year). The absorption center organizes after-school social and educational activities for them.

While the absorption centers are aimed at facilitating an easier assimilation into local society, they often generate the opposite effect, creating a sense of dependency, detachment and isolation. On one hand, the newcomers learn about the culture of their destination country and are motivated to integrate and belong. On the other, they live in isolated groups and maintain the cultural characteristics of their original country (Author 2014).

### Immigration as a Journey – Transnationality, Liminality and Temporariness

I’ve been on the go most of my life. In Shawra we lived in the village. And then we moved to Gondar, and eight years later we moved to Addis Ababa. Three years later we moved to an absorption center in Zefat. Soon we’ll move into our own home. I’m like a bird, moving from place to place, trying to find my own place.

Derese was nineteen years old when he told me his story, recounting 3 years of his life in motion, all aimed toward one goal—making *Aliyah* to Israel. Like him, most of the ZBI community, who immigrated from Ethiopia to Israel after 1993, had experienced a prolonged immigration process. Their immigration journey is composed of four main stations: Their point of departure from villages in northern Ethiopia, their long-term stay in the transition camps in Gondar and Addis Ababa, their stay in the Israeli absorption centers, and their final destination—independent residence in Israel. This process takes many years; in most cases, over a decade.

In the anthropological point of view, a place is never neutral. Each place has its own history, politics and life stories. Gupta & Ferguson (1997) were among the first to use the term “placemaking,” claiming that the concept of place is not trivial. Movement between places means movement between physical locations but also between social locations of belonging, identity and beliefs. Transition can also be to a non-place – a place unknown, such as a country that exists as an intangible concept with a local significance. For the ZBI, the journey becomes part of the immigrant’s identity. The many years of movement, instability, and feeling of transience demand that the immigrants adjust to frequent changes, even as they create the reality of their lives vis-à-vis the new lifestyles they encounter.

The life of the ZBI community changes the moment they begin considering immigrating to Israel. As the days of waiting in the transit camp turn into years, the neighborhoods they occupy receive a renewed meaning. The temporariness of the absorption center characterizes their lifestyle and creates a different meaning of place, as does the permanent dwelling. Movement, temporariness, and waiting create an ongoing situation of living “betwixt and between”. They create a life of permanent liminality while creating new meanings affected by the process of immigration (Autor, 2019).

Life on the move is characterized by transitions, waiting for the next stage in a journey, in an extreme state of constant liminality. Many immigrants experience tension between their religious, cultural, and national identities; several recent studies discuss the context of migration (Bendixsen, Hylland- Erikson, 2019; Gray, 2011; Mountz, 2011; Griffiths et al 2013). A long-term ethnology of the ZBI revealed that the waiting period in the transit camps created four main states of existence: temporariness, hope, fear and dependency (Author 2011), affecting the *Olim*’s everyday life and generating new behaviors, perceptions and positions. Later, in the absorption centers, this feeling of liminality is maintained and even intensified.

The *Olim* know their stay is limited; their social environment keeps changing, with veterans leaving and others replacing them. Children and teenagers who go through this journey develop a variety of ways to interpret their reality, which shape their identity and sense of belonging.

## Methodology

This paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted between the years 2005 and 2012, which included in-depth fieldwork, observations, and interviews in each of the journey’s stations – villages of origin in northern Ethiopia, transit camps in Ethiopia, absorption centers in Israel, and permanent dwellings in Israel, as part of a multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995). While most anthropological studies focus on immigrants after their arrival to their country of destination, this study moved along with the immigrants, escorting them through their journey with its different stops on the way. The author first studied Amharic in order to talk to people in their native language, then travelled along with the ZBI for seven years, lived in each of the places they lived, and witnessed their life, experiencing first-hand the feeling of constantly waiting and moving.

As part of the field research in the transit camp in 2005–2006, the author spent many hours with the youth there. Children and teenagers would come with the Hebrew textbooks they got from friends who had already immigrated to Israel and ask questions about Israeli culture and the Hebrew language. Their motivation to learn was impressive and mostly irrelevant to their life in the transit camp.

Later, in Israel, the author met with some of the children from Ethiopia and inquired about their studies and their feelings at school. Apparently, they were all studying in designated classes – those who had studied in modern schools in Ethiopia alongside those who had no formal education. All of them started learning at first-grade level. It seems they were viewed by the Israeli education system as a homogenic group of weak students. Their extremely different levels of skills and knowledge went completely unnoticed. Furthermore, the author noticed that in most cases, the curriculum was not suitable for their original culture and immigration experiences, and most of the mentors and volunteers who came to the absorption center to help the children with their schoolwork were not professional educators. Further enquiring revealed that despite the official goal of gradually integrating the students into regular classes, most children studied in separate classes throughout their first years in Israel, even though some were perfectly capable of studying in regular classes. The author felt like the state and the education system were misguided in their approach to this community and its absorption, striving for assimilation rather than integration.

In cooperation with stakeholders from the Department of Education and Culture for Ethiopian *Olim* in the Jewish Agency, the author initiated a program to facilitate easier absorption for *Olim* children in the absorption centers, taking into account the cultural and educational contexts of the original country alongside the experience of the immigration process. There was no intention to replace the system, but rather a will to influence and change it. The author established and managed this program between the years 2006 and 2012. The current paper is based on this field work, as well as on in-depth interviews with eight teachers in immigrants’ classes, five officials from the absorption system, twelve employees in the absorption centers, and ten immigrant parents.

### When the Academia Meets the Field

During the research, the author realized that most state officials in the different levels were unaware of the unique character and story of ZBI. *Olim* from Ethiopia were perceived as “third world” people, who came to Israel for material reasons. Officials who had experience with Ethiopian *Olim* from BI assumed that the new *Olim* were much the same, despite the fundamental differences between them. A manager in a northern absorption center reflected this notion: “I have been working with Ethiopians for years. I absorbed the ones who got to Israel first. It doesn’t matter when they came, they are all the same. They are from Ethiopia and they know very little” (personal communication, 2006). Thus, for example, children at the absorption center would celebrate the *Sigd*, a unique holiday celebrated by BI, in which they pray and renew their covenant with God. As Christians in Ethiopia, ZBI had never celebrated this holiday in their home country (until 2012). Yet, the staff in the centers made them celebrate it, in a misguided attempt to create a sense of belonging. Beyond their official religion and immigration circumstances, most of the ZBI *Olim* spent years in transit camps before coming to Israel. Thus, unlike BI *Olim*, who were mostly villagers, ZBI people lived in an urban setting for many years before coming to Israel. They had been exposed to modern media, technology and stories of their relatives, and therefore were much more aware of what was awaiting them in Israel.

The applied anthropology perspective allowed the author to use tools like challenging the obvious, a holistic perspective, critical thinking and reflectivity to translate the story of immigration, the inter-cultural dialogue and the reconstruction of the cultural discourse into everyday practices.

## Matzofim – Practical Tools based on Anthropological Research

The project created by the author was named *Matzofim* (an abbreviation of “excellence and minimizing gaps”). This program has been applied in 18 to 23 of the absorption centers since 2006, targeting students from 1st to 12th grade. Each after-school class included up to twelve students, and the curriculum was adapted individually for each student.

The project had three main goals: (1) By the time they leave the absorption center, every child should know how to read and write in Hebrew and know the four basic mathematical operations. If they had studied in Ethiopia, the goal was to continue their education and adapt it to the Israel education system. (2) Children should be integrated into local classes as early as possible, before the end of their stay in the absorption center, to facilitate their transit into new schools outside of the absorption center. (3) Curricula in the absorption centers and in schools should be changed to suit the students’ skills, acknowledging their heterogeneity and the fact that most had prior education.

To achieve these goals, the project started by educating the teachers and staff at the absorption centers and changing their perceptions and attitudes toward the *Olim*. The staff learned about the students, their unique characteristics and their journey and then developed culturally adapted tools to get to know the students and create dialogue with students and parents.

The program was headed by a steering committee that included teachers of Ethiopian origin who had taught in their country of origin, teachers of immigrant students in Israel, a culture coordinator familiar with the absorption center activity, a curricula counselor, and the author (an anthropologist).

The curriculum combined elements from Ethiopia, Israel, and the unique journey of ZBI into a comprehensive program to suit the specific needs of these students. The curriculum allowed students to move between cultures at their own pace, acknowledge their experiences and feelings, and develop their awareness, based on multicultural and transnational approaches. For example, the teachers realized that some of the *Olim* children had learned mathematics in their Ethiopian schools but could not understand the teacher’s language and terminology. The solution was a mathematic dictionary created by the students and teachers together (thus also helping the teachers to get to know the Amharic terms).

Different methods of teaching and learning were also explored. While memorizing was a common practice in Ethiopia, the Israeli education system encourages a wide, creative discourse. Some students had exceptional memorizing skills, and hence, in Israel, their teachers focused on creative thinking, identifying key words, etc.

### Professional Staff and Training – Teachers in Process of Learning

One of the program’s objectives was to improve the level of professionalism among the staff at the absorption center. In each absorption center, the program leaders traced teachers with experience in teaching *Olim*, some from within the center and others from the surrounding area. The teachers worked with the mentors, who were responsible for the children’s after-school activities. It was decided that mentors would work with children on their homework, while teachers would focus on educational subjects, advancing the students’ academic level to that of their class.

The author met the educational team three times a year for inter-cultural training, structured according to the needs of the teachers and mentors. Additionally, the author held personal meetings with the teachers every six weeks, where they set individual goals for each child. By highlighting anthropological insights and exposing teachers to Ethiopian textbooks and teaching methods, the author was able to help the teachers understand their students better, thus improving their practice.

### Homogeneity and Heterogeneity

Paying individual attention to each child is a key principle of the Matzofim program. The anthropological perspective highlights different voices and points out the difficulty of categorizing and branding groups. Yet, absorption policy is often generalized, particularly during massive immigration waves, when individual attention is challenging. Although “they all look the same and come from the same place” (2009, Teacher, absorption center in northern Israel), teachers had to realize that each child is an individual, with a different narrative and knowledge.

The staff learned about the immigration process, the meaning of movement, liminality and temporariness, and the meaning of the absorption center as part of the children’s experience. The second stage was getting to know the children as individuals. Teachers used their new insights to distinguish between language and content and create individual plans for students based on their different strengths.

The steering committee concluded that no learning could happen without interpersonal connections. At the beginning of each year, teachers interviewed the students, asking whether they had studied in Ethiopia, and if they had, what type of school they were in and what subjects they had studied. This information helped the teachers establish the student’s background and immigration process. For instance, a child who came from a village and never went to school should start by learning basic skills such as holding a pen or sitting in class; if they went to a local school, they might have some knowledge of mathematics and science and could build on this knowledge. The anthropological holistic view allowed teachers to notice the *Olim* children’s academic and personal abilities.

Simcha, a teacher at a northern absorption center, told me:

At first, I taught them all in the same way. I knew they came from Ethiopia, and I had twenty years of experience. But when the program started, and we did the interviews, I was shocked. I discovered that some children knew things I never imagined, but they sat quietly and said nothing in class. I realized there were huge differences between children who came from the village and those who came from the city. I realized that in each class, while there were only twelve children, I had at least three levels: Those who were illiterate, those who knew something, and those who were excellent... (2011).

Rachel, a teacher at a northern absorption center, who had previous experience as a teacher in an absorption center that was not part of the program, said:

I taught everyone. I identified a group of strong students, I enjoyed teaching them. There were two students in my class who always sat quietly, looking at me. I would ask them questions and realize they didn’t understand me. They had trouble writing, and I thought they had problems, some learning disabilities. When we were asked to talk to the students as part of the project, I was shocked. I realized the stronger students were the ones who had studied previously, in Ethiopia, and that the two weak students came from the village. They had never been to school, they had been shepherds. They were both adorable children who wanted to learn so much. I thought they had learning disabilities; I had no idea they never went to school. After the interview, I felt bad, I realized I was judging them from an Israeli perspective, as a teacher for so many years. I had never paid enough attention to their background and knowledge, I thought they were just like everyone else... (2009).

### The Journey of Immigration and the Absorption Center as a Stop on the Way

Before the program was initiated, the contents taught at the absorption center were derived from the absorbing Israeli culture. The discourse was multi-cultural, but the practice was that of the melting pot. The objective to teach students and help them integrate into Israeli society practically ignored their personal narrative and life story. The project added contents related to the immigration process, the original culture, and the meaning of the absorption center as part of the journey. For example, as part of the research, the author realized that the immigration journey includes a lot of sudden departures – from the village to the transit camp, and from there to Israel. Tesfanesh, a girl from a southern absorption center, said:

One day, my parents told me we were going to Israel. The next morning, we set out for Gondar. We lived there for nine years, and then, one day, the Israeli government told us we were going to Israel. We left two days later. I never had the chance to say goodbye to my friends in the village, or to my friends in Gondar. While staying in Gondar, I saw people leaving for Israel, just like that. Those who get permits leave in a day or two... (2008).

Parting and saying goodbye are important emotional issues, which undoubtedly affect the students. Based on this understanding, the teachers paid attention to the parting process when the children were about to leave the absorption center. They discussed the meaning of parting and talked about saying goodbye to friends at school and in the absorption center. This discourse was aimed at lessening the hardship of sudden farewells as experienced by the children in the previous stops on their journey and helped the children to discuss relevant issues while also learning to use their new language.

Teachers gave their students some practical tools like using municipal services, finding your way in a new place and choosing between options, creating a sense of belonging and a bridge to their new culture. Teachers also used culturally adapted learning aids like letter card-games with images from Ethiopia and mathematical problems based on Ethiopian concepts like *Injera* (Ethiopian traditional dish), sheep / cows, and landscapes of Ethiopia instead of concepts that were foreign to students.

The learning contents focused on differences and similarities between the cultures while also trying to integrate them, creating one holistic experience instead of two different life stories – before and after immigration. The feeling of continuity proved extremely significant in creating a sense of belonging both to the country of origin and the new country. The basic assumption was that erasing, ignoring or dismissing the past according to the melting pot paradigm leads to frustration and difficulties in adjusting to the new place.

### Liminality and Temporariness

During the research, the author came to realize that ZBI children live in a constant state of liminality, from the moment they leave their original home until many years after their immigration journey is completed (Author 2018). Furthermore, their stay in the absorption center is temporary by definition, thus conveying the fact that they are still not “home”, still moving between stations. The *Olim* feel like temporary residents in the absorption center, yet the teachers, who usually reside in the surrounding area, are often oblivious to this. This state of liminality leads to misunderstandings and frustrations on both sides, for example, around school supplies and timetables.

A teacher from a northern absorption center said:

At the beginning of the year, it was tough. One day I had four students, and the next I had nine. I couldn’t teach like that. They would also forget their supplies at home, come without their school box or notebooks. I was very angry and told them: “You are given these things for free, and you disregard them like that”. After listening to a lecture and talking to some parents, I realized there was a big difference between their previous lifestyle and their life in the absorption center. Here, they were expected to follow a structured schedule from 6:00AM to 7:00PM. They were always studying or doing something, they had no time to rest, or even meet their parents. They also told me that in Ethiopia, they didn’t have so much stuff. The important thing was to study. Those who went to school were the fortunate ones. Here, in Israel, they were constantly being examined, like being on a test all day long. I realized they couldn’t turn their lives upside down in a minute. We created a schedule together, with the children and their parents, and then things changed. They started showing up for class with their stuff. This process only worked because I learned from them, I had the patience and I realized that a lot of things that I had perceived as wrong was actually right. (2010)

### Resource Pooling and Collaborations

The program started in a small number of selected absorption centers, and was later expanded to include most of them, affecting a growing circle of stakeholders. One of the program’s goals was to encourage collaborations between professional entities – social workers, culture coordinator, mentors and teachers. Further collaborations were created between schools and absorption centers, and particularly between parents, their children’s educational institutions, and their after-school curriculum. For example, teachers from the schools were invited to visit the absorption centers and get to know the children’s lives. Parents were encouraged to join PTA committees, and children from school would come to the absorption centers for a shared day of activity, creating a sense of partnership and familiarity.

### Parents and their Role

Naturally, parental roles and status change throughout the process of immigration. Many parents lose their independence and self-efficacy. They get used to being assisted and expect their environment to help them. The parents’ disengagement is interpreted by the staff as indifference toward their children. Sara, a teacher in a northern absorption center, said: “The parents care about nothing, as long as their children have something to do. They don’t understand Hebrew anyway, and they never ask about their children...” (2008).

In practice, however, parents are often disengaged because they are unable to follow their children’s schedule, written in a language they cannot read, or follow a foreign time concept. The realization that the parents want to be more involved and need some knowledge to manage their own lives in Israel led the staff to create tools that would restore independence and parental responsibility. As part of the program, parents were actively engaged and got explanations about the education system in Israel, and both teachers and parents made an effort to expand the dialogue about these issues.

Beyond lectures, parents were asked to take practical steps to regain their parental role. For example, the program was explained, and they had to approve their children’s participation in it. The consent form was bi-lingual – in Amharic and Hebrew. The children’s schedule was printed in colors, so parents who couldn’t read Hebrew could follow it. A communication notebook was created, where teachers described the children’s behavior using symbols that were agreed in advance. The absorption centers started having teacher-parent meetings, similar to the ones held in schools, to help parents adjust to the new system and help the teachers learn more about the children and their parents. Parents were invited to be part of shared activities to better illustrate the Israeli learning experience. The author was able to use academic knowledge and insights to highlight these aspects to the teachers, and together they came up with solutions for difficulties.

Staff-parent seminars promoted collaboration between parents and the absorption centers’ staff. Teachers were able to tell parents about norms in Israel, while parents explained what they were used to in the past, leading to dialogue and mutual learning. This was some teachers’ first opportunity to visit the children’s homes and understand this aspect of their life.

Seminars were also an opportunity to learn the story of the Ethiopian immigration first-hand. Teachers learned that the long journey and waiting period created frustration among the *Olim*, who developed an expectation that once they got to Israel, everything would be easier and they would be compensated for the lost years. Before the program, some staff members interpreted these feelings as rude or blunt. Lea, a teacher, said: “When we came to Israel, we had to do everything ourselves. They come and get a house, clothes, money. They get everything and hardly bother to say thank you. They appreciate nothing”. After listening to a talk about the transit camp, she said: “When I heard they have been waiting for so many years, I realized what they have been through... Now I can look at them differently. Before, I thought they were rude, ignorant, but now I realize they suffered”.

The teacher-parent seminars also allowed parents to convey the differences between their old and new country. For example, parents in Ethiopia are less involved in their children’s education than parents are in Israel. Teachers are regarded as knowledgeable, and parents trust their judgement. Yet, in Israel parents are expected to be more involved and proactive. A father in a northern absorption center said:

They tell us to choose whether or not to send the boy to a boarding school. In Ethiopia, the teacher would decide the level of studies according to the student and teacher’s level. In Ethiopia, teachers are important, they are believed to know everything, like the government. In Israel, they keep asking us questions as parents, asking us to choose between options we know nothing about. We trust the teachers. I know a boarding school can be good, but it can also be bad. I am not familiar with the Israeli education system, and no one explains it, so how should I know what to choose or how? (2010)

**Challenges**

Such a project also entails difficulties. Since this project emerged from the field, it was difficult to mobilize the establishment to take part in it and translate concepts like “waiting” into functional, measurable, organizational concepts. Additionally, the organization demanded clear goals at the starting point, but the project was developed on the go, and the need to unify all centers was a significant challenge that was sometimes solved through ongoing activity and discourse. The main difficulty was the fact that the project was not free of pressures, interests, and political and financial considerations. Throughout its implementation, it was considered as temporary, particularly due to political and financial restraints. As an applied anthropologist, I directed the project and mentored the content aspects, but I also had a lot of work in the administrative aspect. The greatest tension originated from questions around my place as an anthropologist, such as: To what extent can an anthropologist avoid being part of the system? To what extent can they rebel against this system, which is also their employer? Where is the boundary between my commitment to this system and my commitment to the *Olim*? To what extent does the anthropologist’s work contribute to the system and improve it? And to what extent can you translate theoretical insights into actions in the field? My guiding lines were to remain an independent anthropologist external to the system, to hold periodic consultations with representatives of all participants (students, teachers, staff at the absorption centers), and to measure the success of the project annually by parameters defined in advance by both the organization and myself. Once I felt that the anthropological contents had been assimilated in the system, I gave the director role to an employee at the absorption center.

## Conclusions

Applied anthropology uses academic paradigms and tools to develop extra-academic practices in a variety of fields, offering solutions to social and political challenges and bridging and counseling in inter-cultural issues. Paradigms based on challenging the obvious, heterogenic outlook, various perspectives, critical, holistic thinking and reflectivity are the foundations for the practical work. The current case-study demonstrates the power of applied anthropology to combine theory with practice in the effort to change reality and contributes to the understanding and improvement of absorption processes. An applied anthropologist with theoretical and practical knowledge was able to offer some unique advantages – seeing the *Olim* as a heterogenic population and offering an in-depth knowledge of their immigration story, the original and the new culture, cultural relativism, and a holistic point of view. The anthropologist facilitated collaboration between different entities and integrated the perspectives of *Olim*, locals, and organizations. Immigration should be viewed as a long-term journey. In the Matzofim program, the goal was to work with newcomers, locals and policy makers to shape an education system that allows transculturalism, transnationalism and hybridity instead of a single “appropriate” culture of the country of destination. Professionals who work with immigrants usually come with the best intentions, but they often need to adopt a perspective of cultural acceptance and adaptation, which can be supported by an anthropological perspective.

The common practices of educational systems in absorbing countries range between the expectation of complete assimilation and a multi-cultural discourse that allows dialog and continuation of the immigration process. The absorption of mass immigration waves is often generalized and homogenic. Applied anthropology can translate immigration practices and insights into practical educational and absorption approaches. By combining a multi-cultural approach and understanding about the nature of immigration, the anthropologist can train the absorbing staff to improve their practices. A heterogenic and individualized view of the immigrants, as well as understanding of the liminality and temporariness of the immigration process, are translated into stronger collaboration, dialog, and empowerment.

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1. “Absorption center” is the common name in Israel for a temporary form of assisted living designated for Olim, where they learn the language and get to know the new country before starting their independent life in it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Government Decision no. 716 (November 15, 2015) referred to 9,100 people. Out of them, about 1,300 came to Israel in 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. In 2016, there were 22 absorption centers for Ethiopian *Olim*, and five additional centers for *Olim* from other countries. Ethiopian *Olim* are required to go through absorption centers, while *Olim* from other countries are presented with the option and can choose whether or not to use it. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)