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Increasing access to higher education and employment, Ethiopian immigrants’ in Israel

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In modern societies, where higher education serves as a significant vehicle of integration, the inclusion of immigrants within the realm of higher education is not a foregone conclusion. This is the result of cultural, economic, and social gaps. In some cases, the integration process is blocked prior to the stage of academic studies. This situation has resulted in the creation of a teacher education program for Ethiopian students in Israeli academic colleges of education for the purpose of bridging the gap between higher education and employment, and increasing the chances of the graduates’ admission into the field of teaching. The aim of the present study was to examine the success of the program, emphasizing the graduates’ integration into the teaching profession. It was conducted by means of Mixed Methods research. An examination of the data indicates that a substantial number of graduates were integrated into various educational settings. It also reveals the improving status of the graduates as well as the influence of the program on their personal and professional development.

Keywords: teacher education; multiculturalism; immigrant education; inclusion; social justice

Theoretical introduction

Ethiopian immigrants in Israel

The Ethiopian immigrants who arrived in Israel during the two waves of organized mass emigration from Ethiopia in 1984 and 1991 were ideologically motivated: they dreamed of reaching the ‘promised land’ in Zion. The 1984 migratory wave was particularly difficult (Malko 2005) for those that took this step. The hardships endured by the migrants on their way to Israel were analyzed by Ben-Ezer (2007), who identified the themes characterizing the collective identity of the Ethiopian immigrants as a community from the stories of young people who survived and succeeded in reaching Israel. These themes were Jewish identity, suffering, and courage. The first theme, Jewish identity, represents above all the immigrants’ conviction that their journey to Israel was guided by God. They felt worthy of Israeli society’s appreciation of and respect for their physical and mental suffering. However, a segment of Israeli society, which perceived the immigrants as people who totally lacked support and who had come to Israel in order to escape hunger and persecution (Ben-Ezer 2007), reacted with a certain degree of discrimination.

From the point of view of ethnicity, the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants represent the greatest cultural differentness that currently exists in Israel. Even though they

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may well constitute the only community of black Jews in the world, the Ethiopians did not feel ‘black’ until they came to Israel (Erlich, Salmon, and Kaplan 2003). The facts reveal that a significant percentage of this population occupies the lowest socioeconomical level in the Israeli social structure, manifesting economic, educational, and social gaps along with high rates of unemployment (Israel Association for Ethiopian Jewry 2003).

The significant differences that exist between Ethiopian culture and the dominant Israeli culture pose a major difficulty in acquiring education. Most immigrants came from rural areas in northern Ethiopia – areas where there were no formal studies – and brought with them personal and behavioral norms that characterized the culture in which they lived (Ben-Ezer 2007; Shabtai 2001). The combination of cultural differences and the economic situation affects many aspects of the lives of Ethiopian immigrants and their offspring in respect to the number of years of schooling and also of the chances of the second generation becoming socially mobile.

**The difficulties experienced by the second generation in being accepted to higher education settings**

Among immigrants in general, and among the Ethiopian Jews immigrants in particular, intercultural encounters have triggered complex challenges in various domains (Mirsy 2005), especially with respect to access to higher education, employment, and social and economic integration within the new society.

A brief glance at per capita income (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006) presents the social stratification map as the result of educational data, migration period, and income. The link between education and employment in the various population groups frequently reveals an extreme polarity between Jews and Arabs and immigrants and natives (Adler and Blass 2009; Schleicher 2006). From this point of view, the Ethiopian community is a well-defined group in Israel’s social mosaic.

The difficulties of integrating into higher education settings, particularly into teaching, are partially attributable to language difficulties, a lack of familiarity with cultural codes, and an overall conceptual outlook which differs from that of the mainstream (Malko 2005; Schatz-Oppenheimer and Kalnisky, under review). Ethiopian immigrants’ cultural patterns, such as the code of respect toward one’s elders and toward authority, and the resistance to adhere to a schedule may affect not only learning outcomes but also the extent of equal integration into society. Such difficulties come to the fore in psychometric tests (required for acceptance to colleges and universities) (Ben-Ezer 2007; Cook-Golan 2008; Mirsky 2005).

Some studies show linguistic difficulties in the literacy of second-generation Ethiopian children. For instance, in a study on the acquisition of written language, Shani (2006) revealed learning gaps between Ethiopian children and other pupils with regard to level of knowledge, solution of complex problems, and literacy. Moreover, according to Shani’s study, some of the Ethiopian students’ linguistic abilities were found to be inferior to those of the general population. These difficulties are also typical of Israeli-born children who belong to the lower socioeconomic strata (Schleifer 2007).

Consistent with this chain of events, the distribution of Ethiopian teachers throughout Israel’s education system fails to reflect the proportion of Ethiopian immigrants among the entire population. In 2008, the Ethiopian population numbered over 106,900, of whom 23,000 were children aged 5–19 who were
attending the Israeli school system. According to Ministry of Education, there were only about 135 Ethiopian teachers working in the education system at that time. Ethiopian students relate to the teaching profession as a field by means of which they can effect changes on a personal level in order to improve their position in society. In addition, they believe that by teaching, they will have the power to implement significant social changes (Rubin, Millet, and Gilat 2008).

Among other things, Ethiopian culture is characterized by very good interpersonal relationships. This effective communication has been recognized as contributing to Israeli teacher education, and this is evidence that differences occasionally give rise to advantages. This is one of the justifications for the establishment of an intercultural program that will be described briefly below, as opposed to the reductionist approach that focuses on cultural diversity from the perspective of the immigrant minority as the ‘other culture’, divorced from the social factors that influence academic training. It is an attempt to develop an educational type in which interculturalism is connected to curriculum development (PeñaVélez, and Aguiar Idáñez 2011).

**A unique teacher education program**

Recent decades have witnessed multiple approaches supporting the need to expand the access of students from different sectors and with diverse learning characteristics to higher education (Lidor and Dahan 2008; Moses, Yun, and Martin 2009). However, only a small number of institutional initiatives have been launched for the purpose of facilitating the access of students from different cultural sectors or with special skills to higher education. Some examples of such initiatives include the teacher education program for the Bedouin sector (Reingold 2007) and teacher education programs for excellent students (Klavir et al. 2009; Magid 2009). The admission requirements and the curricula of these academic programs have been modified to conform to the students’ characteristics.

The year 2001 heralded the inauguration of a unique program for Ethiopian immigrants at an Israeli academic college of education. While the program is based on the current curriculum, in accordance with the existing academic institutional structure, it contains additional policies and provides extra hours in order to increase the inclusion of Ethiopian students. This pluralistic model (Cochran-Smith 2000; Reingold 2008; Yogev 2001) includes:

1. expanded curriculum: placing particular emphasis on fostering literacy;
2. expanded enrichment program: placing particular emphasis on fostering general and personal empowerment;
3. enhanced digital domain: assistance in purchasing computers;
4. leadership development: leadership development among teachers of Ethiopian origin may lead to the development of new models of multicultural inclusion so as to improve the social climate regarding the issue of accepting diversity, which heads the agenda of Israel’s education system;
5. academic and economic support for students;
6. program evaluation: an examination of the extent to which the modified acceptance conditions predict the integration of graduates into employment settings;
(7) strengthening cultural ties to the Ethiopian heritage in the form of a special course on Ethiopian Jewish heritage; the development of an Ethiopian Jewish Heritage Center; and, at the end of the training process, a journey to Ethiopia that is perceived as having the potential to strengthen cultural and professional identity (Schatz-Oppenheimer and Kalnisky 2010);

(8) post-graduation follow-up and support: supervised workshops and guidance during the graduates’ integration into the teaching profession; and

(9) facilitation of access to teacher education as a result of special acceptance criteria.

Because it reinforces cultural and experiential aspects, the program is innovative as compared with conventional methods which seek one main model that is consistent with the ideal national values. Underlying the program is the idea of pluralism and respect for diversity and acceptance. We are striving to ensure that the graduates imbue schools with a breath of fresh air in the form of their contribution of values, tolerance, and acceptance.

The purpose of the present study is to study a number of employment issues in teaching from an objective perspective as well as from the graduates’ perspective.

Methodology

Research approach

First, the research deals with the contribution of the training and with employment-related issues based on the subjective data obtained from graduates (2005–2009). Second, the graduates’ employment status was examined and updated in 2012.

Research population

A majority of the students, who are natives of rural areas in Ethiopia, arrived in Israel during the waves of immigration in 1984 and 1991. Prior to commencing their studies, they had been employed in semi-professional occupations in which they served as assistants to kindergarten teachers, work coordinators for new Ethiopian immigrants, workers at absorption centers, and coordinators of activities at community centers.

The research group consisted of 75 graduates who had completed their studies in the program between 2005 and 2009. Of these, 55 had graduated with BEd degrees. In this study, only 40 graduates (30% men and 70% women) who had completed their studies between 2005 and 2009 responded to the questionnaire. They had all acquired preschool and elementary school teaching certificates as well as BEd degrees in a variety of specializations.

The ages of the respondents ranged from 22 to 38 (Mean 28; ST = 5.00). With regard to their marital status at the beginning of their studies, 50.0% were married, 42.5% were single, and 7.5% were single parents; 47.5% had no children, 27.5% had one or two children, and 25% had three or more children.

With respect to the year of their immigration to Israel, 62.5% immigrated between 1982 and 1987, and 37.5% between 1988 and 2001. There were no Israeli-born graduates. Their academic performance prior to their college studies was reflected in their high school matriculation scores (Mean 76.84; SD 9.12). At the end of the first year in the program, the mean score had risen to 80.22 (SD 4.06).
Data collection tools

First stage: DEMOGRAPHIC data were retrieved from the college database, and open questionnaires dealing both with the subjective contribution of the training and with employment aspects were administered to the graduates.

Second stage: A brief telephone interview regarding the graduates’ actual occupational status was conducted.

The research process

A mixed methods approach was employed for examining the data, adopting an embedded design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007). Both statistical and conventional content analyses of the qualitative data were conducted. An analysis of the data collected from the questionnaires was performed, and the data were restructured into meaningful categories according to the subjects of the analysis approach, targeting sections of texts while maintaining the significance of the context (Denzim 2008; Ryan and Bernard 2000). In order to validate the questionnaire, a preliminary exploratory study was conducted on a small group of eight students.

For the purpose of examining the internal consistency of the above-mentioned categories, the researcher implemented the process of ‘reliability between judges’ (Shkedi 2003). The categories proposed by the researcher were compared to those of two fellow researchers, yielding a correlation of over 90% between the researcher’s opinions and those of the other experts. In cases of disagreement, dialogue among the researchers resulted in a consensus.

Findings and discussion

The contribution of the teacher education program

The main research question in the study focused on the participants’ perceptions of various aspects of their training and the contribution of these aspects to their development.

The analysis of the open questionnaires yielded two main content categories: the areas of contribution of the program, and the personal contribution of the program to the participants.

(a) The areas of contribution

The areas of contribution of the training yielded the following sub-categories:

- Pedagogy classes;
- Practical training;
- Social pedagogy courses such as psychology and developmental psychology;
- Extracurricular activities such as workshops on individual and group empowerment, workshops focusing on seeking employment, activities fostering professional empowerment, seminars on Ethiopian Jewish Heritage, the journey to Ethiopia at the end of the program.

Table 1 presents the meaningful language units that were counted.

Table 1 shows that the graduates perceived the experiential extracurricular activities (Schatz-Oppenheimer and Kalnisky 2010) as contributing the most, followed by the practical training, and displays the rates of the contribution of the pedagogy and pedagogical-sociological courses. The graduates stressed the experience of learning,
the classroom atmosphere, and the possibility of applying the topics to their private lives. Certain aspects of these findings are in line with the findings pertaining to graduates of other colleges of education in Israel. Studies (Pasternak 1991; Shachar et al. 2002) on the evaluation of professional teacher education determined that graduates evaluated the practical work component as making the largest contribution. These findings are consistent with the Ethiopian graduates’ choice of practical training and pedagogical studies as contributing the most in our study.

The impact of the experience, the excitement, and the practical interest constitutes an important component in the Ethiopian graduates’ assessment of various courses. This result further supports experiential learning that was grounded in the training they received, and was also one of the theoretical pillars of the program. Furthermore, the experiential learning was compatible with the cultural learning patterns of Ethiopian students.

Empowerment by means of the experiential and cultural aspects that characterized some of the program activities is unique and innovative as compared with conventional teacher education methods (Yoge 2001). The program underscored the idea of pluralism and the acceptance of differences in the hope that the contribution of these graduates would be to imbue education in Israel with values, tolerance, and acceptance (Reingold 2008).

**Contribution of the program to the graduates’ development**

A content analysis of the open questionnaires yielded two major subcategories:

*Contribution to personal development* – This category included statements relating to self-confidence, expanding knowledge, an overall change in personality, and an improvement in personal and social status.

*Contribution to professional development* – This category included statements relating to teaching experience, academic achievements, and contribution to work in general. Table 2 presents the contribution of the studies as perceived by graduates.

The table shows that the teaching graduates recognized the contribution of the studies to teacher education (59.46%). This view is consistent with the purpose of the actual preparation and similar to the perceptions of other graduates of colleges of education. Unlike other graduates, however, the Ethiopian graduates consider their studies to make a very important and unique contribution to their personal development (40.54%), as witnessed by their enhanced self-confidence and social status.

A perusal of the research literature (Shagrir, Fishel, and Barak 2010) furnishes numerous similarities between Ethiopian graduates and other graduates from colleges of education with respect to their evaluation of the contribution of their

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Table 1. Contribution of the components of the training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>26.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical training</td>
<td>22.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy classes</td>
<td>20.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>16.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialization studies</td>
<td>10.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal support</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Kalnisky, Millet, and Cohen (in press). Fields of hope. Tel Aviv: The MOFET Institute.
training to their conduct as teachers. However, the significant difference between them resided in the Ethiopian graduates’ approach to personal development.

The similarity between the two groups of graduates may be indicative of some transformational processes and may point at the integration of the Ethiopian immigrants into Israeli society. However, there are also differences between the groups that may foreground the fact that the Ethiopians’ chosen mode of integration preserved cultural values alongside the adoption of new patterns (Mirsky 2005).

### Rates of employment – before and after the program

A combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data was performed. The participant’s jobs were classified according to the graduates’ pre- and post-program occupational levels. The categories that emerged in this study from the information supplied by the questionnaires were as follows:

1. Semi-professional employment in education and health: mediators at absorption centers, translators for old Ethiopian immigrants, youth leaders, coordinators of senior citizens’ clubs, and instructors at hostels for handicapped children;
2. Community service in education: for instance, kindergarten assistants;
3. General service jobs: supermarket cashiers, telephone survey personnel, and taxi drivers;
4. Professional teaching jobs: elementary school teachers, adult education teachers, kindergarten teachers, and special education teachers; and
5. Administrative positions: project managers and absorption center managers.

As can be seen in Table 3, of the total number of respondents (40), 53% were employed in teaching in 2009 and 50% in 2012. Between 47% (2009) and 50% (2012) were engaged in other work, some of them in management positions in education. In 2009, 60% of the graduates were part-time workers and 40% full-time workers. In 2012, the proportion of individuals involved in teaching decreased (50%), but there was an increase in the proportion of individuals occupying administrative positions in education (23%).

The findings show that in 2009, 28 (65%) of the respondents significantly enhanced their employment status as compared with 12 (25%) for whom no such improvement occurred. It is evident that the improvement was greater after 2012: 73% of the 30 respondents improved their status, while 27% reported no change.
Similar findings emerged from a study accompanying a program for the empowerment of Ethiopian students for educational leadership implemented at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem since 1999 (Agur and Rosenberg 2006). The latter research shows the post-study rate of occupation to be as follows: 64% of the graduates found employment, 57% of them full-time; 90% worked in education; 82% indicated that they intended to find employment in education; however, they reported difficulty in finding work.

In contrast, a review of the current research on college graduates involved in teaching in the country revealed that 78–90% were employed in teaching (Shagrir, Fishel, and Barak 2010). In the present study, however, we found the proportion of Ethiopian graduates employed in teaching to be lower than the overall proportion of all graduates in the country. While they may indeed have improved their employment status, it is still inferior to the norm. Assuming that the country’s teacher education standards are uniform, this presents an alarming picture. What is the underlying reason for the differences?

A partial answer to this question can be found in the graduates’ perception according to which Israel is still afflicted by some degree of discrimination based on skin color. This serious claim has to be investigated by studying the young teachers’ ability, experience, and other qualifications pertaining to the teaching profession. Although there is a significant improvement in employment rates in the field of teaching, additional employment indices were deemed necessary. To this end, the teacher education program mentioned in this study was devised, part of which involved offering support and mediation in the post-program stages.

### Difficulties in finding employment

The findings show that although 43.24% of the respondents did not report encountering any particular difficulties in the process of looking for work, 45.95% did describe a variety of difficulties they had experienced in this process. The remaining 10.81% had not yet commenced their search for employment.

An analysis of the responses yielded several content categories:

**A) I have a resource in my hands**

In this category, the participants expressed their suspicion that the chances of getting a teaching job depended on the practical resources available to the school (for instance, the hours allocated by the Ministry of Education for the employment of immigrants) or intangible resources (such as personal connections) without which the participants were not hired:

Maybe if I did not have the six hours per week for immigrant teachers, the school would not absorb me. These six hours help to open the door even if they are only a few.
(B) There’s no work in the profession I acquired

This category includes the graduates’ perceptions of the difficult stages inherent in looking for work. They pointed out a lack of employment opportunities, the Ministry of Education’s stringent requirements of teachers, and the inadequate teaching schedule:

In my profession I had some trouble finding a job. Someone was told that the profession was too general. But I want to tell you I’m not out of work (hungry) Lack of experience. They are always looking for people with experience.

(C) Appearance-based discrimination:

There were situations where everything went well during the phone conversation, but when I appeared for the interview they said: ‘Oh it’s you’.

The graduates’ words indicate that they recognized the major difficulties inherent in the employment-seeking stage as well as in the availability of employment opportunities. While these findings should be taken into account in the programs that aim to promote the integration of Ethiopian graduates, the vast majority of programs are designed to promote the integration of the weaker group with less formal education (Haas 2006). Moreover, they pointed out that only those equipped with the appropriate resources can obtain employment. These statements reveal a discriminatory attitude toward the Ethiopian teachers on the part of employers, parents, and work teams.

Other possible reasons for the difficulty experienced by Ethiopian teachers in finding suitable work may be attributed to cultural patterns that are incompatible with the competitive employment-seeking patterns that are prevalent in Israel. A competitive market requires a level of assertiveness as well as personal and social resources in order for a candidate to succeed (Kalnisky 2007). Some studies have identified personal variables that might not only explain the differences among people during the transition to work, but also predict success or failure. Blustein et al. (1997) identified three personality traits that may serve as predictors of success: (1) active awareness of careers, employment, and alternatives, (2) personal and environmental resources available to the individual, and (3) a coherent self-concept. It is likely that among Ethiopian immigrants, not only is their awareness of career and employment insufficient, but they also lack the social and financial resources to make the successful transition to work.

The poor integration of Ethiopian immigrants in the employment domain can be ascribed to numerous instances of discrimination in conjunction with a lack of the personal, social, and cultural resources for equipping them with the requisite tools for social mobility. In conclusion, the data regarding the rate of employment may constitute an objective reality, but in order to gain a deep understanding of the issue, the subjective vision of the candidates, as presented in the quotation, is an essential component.

Employment difficulties

Of the graduates employed in teaching, 57.15% reported that they had not encountered any particular difficulties at work, as compared to 42.88%, who reported various difficulties in seeking employment. These reported difficulties can be divided into two distinct categories:
(A) **Discrimination**

At work I have to deal with difficulties such as non-acceptance of racial differences, ethnicity.

In the teachers’ room … It’s difficult for the school staff to accept new teachers.

They (the teachers) are trying to take advantage of my naïveté. As it happens, I’m fine and doing well. They are trying to set me up.

When I worked as a kindergarten teacher in an after-school program, the parents did not accept me; the teacher’s assistant was not cooperative, and it was hard for them to accept that I’m the teacher and not the teacher’s assistant. Now everyone has gotten used to the situation and supports me.

(B) **Employment conditions**

It’s a profession without social conditions and without a future. Minimum salary.

Luckily, I have not encountered problems that depend on me, but there are problems on an organizational level, for example: I have no fixed classroom in which I can teach my students. They are children with special needs and I run around with them to find an available room. It’s difficult for students who need a defined and fixed environment.

The sense of discrimination in the workplace is the most prominent theme associated with graduates employed in teaching. Strong feelings of discrimination are more typical for graduates once they are employed than before they began working. While it is difficult to alter common stereotypes in society as a whole, educational settings can and should be aware of internal discrimination processes occurring within schools and work toward rectifying them. Among those who succeed in finding employment, there is also a recurrent reference to objective external conditions such as salaries and physical conditions as serious difficulties even after they have found a job.

It should be noted that studies on attrition among Ethiopian teachers demonstrate it to be a result of integration, status, and salary problems (Millet and Michael 2003). Job satisfaction is a ‘critical mass’ that serves to prevent attrition and foster persistence in the profession (Katzir and Kramer 1993). Although the participants in the current study were not questioned directly about job satisfaction, it can be concluded from their feelings of disillusionment in various fields that these can lead to dissatisfaction and attrition. Indirect questions about their difficulties at work probably yielded more valuable information than direct questions, which are inclined to generate stereotypical responses.

Since this study identifies areas of discontent, it has the potential to enlighten the powers that be with regard to the situation of Ethiopian graduates and to ameliorate it. It is important to address real opportunities and support the graduates during the employment-seeking phase.

**Conclusions, insights, and implications**

The employment of Ethiopian college graduates is an issue that relates to all areas of employment and not only to teaching (King and Valda-Tzadik 2006). This issue
has been examined in recent years following efforts expended by education and financial institutions in the hope that they would culminate in suitable employment as a proof of the effectiveness of the investment in education. Such efforts notwithstanding, findings on the integration of Ethiopian academics into the labor market indicate the difficulties and obstacles that exist in their quest to find employment that is appropriate to their level of education (Haas 2006). Conversely, there are findings that show an increase in employment rates among Ethiopian academics.

The aims of the teacher education program described in this study were to enable the Ethiopian students to (1) integrate into higher education, (2) be included in the employment world, and (3) become leaders endowed with the ability to effect the desired changes in the institutions in which they work so as to improve intercultural education. The curriculum was built according to this orientation.

The results presented here demonstrate that the unique teacher education program is helpful in promoting immigrants’ social mobility as based on reasonable rates of employment. The influence of the program on the Ethiopian graduates’ personal and professional development also foregrounds the importance of utilizing the curriculum to deal with personal as well as professional development. The program aims to provide specific responses to specific needs by means of personal conversations, financial support, or guidance vis-à-vis family and social behavior. This, however, is not sufficient; it is also necessary to investigate the employment options and prepare the new teachers to cope with the alarming reasons for the difficulties that exist during the process of finding employment as well as in the jobs themselves.

The examination of the data indicates that the graduates were being integrated into the various educational frameworks at a reasonable rate and that their status was improving. Taking these results and the growing interest in Ethiopian students on the part of other colleges of education into consideration, the Ministry of Education decided to extend the original program to a number of other colleges with the aim of furnishing a solution for young people who possessed suitable qualities for teaching but were finding it difficult to fulfill the acceptance requirements.

This study identifies pockets of discontent that should be identified and eradicated. It is important to ensure not only that genuine opportunity are afforded at the employment-seeking stage, but also that action is taken to prevent discrimination in workplaces after the Ethiopian immigrants have been integrated into them.

Notes on contributor
Esther Kalinsky coordinates teacher education programs for students of Ethiopian origin at academic colleges of education in Israel. At Achva College of Education, she serves as a lecturer and researcher in the fields of multiculturalism, inclusion, vocational orientation, and teacher education. At The MOFET Institute, she serves as the coordinator for professional ties with Ethiopian and Spanish speaking communities and she is the academic director of the ITEC, International Portal of Teacher Education in Spanish.

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