Day School Israel Education in the Age of Birthright

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What are North American Jewish day schools doing when they engage in Israel education, what shapes their practices, and to what ends? In this article, we report on a multi-method study inspired by these questions. Our account is organized around an analytical model that helps distinguish between what we call the vehicles, intensifiers, and conditions of day school Israel education. Our discussion explores the possibility that when it comes to Israel education, schools have shifted from a paradigm of instruction to one of enculturation. This shift, we suggest, is indicative of a generalized anxiety about students’ commitments to Israel and about their capacity to advocate for Israel when they “come of age” at university.

“For building connections to Israel, there is no substitute for bringing young adult Jews face to face with their history and engaging them with their Israeli peers.” Thus conclude Saxe and his collaborators in relation to what has been learned from research into the impact of Birthright Israel over the last 10 years (Saxe et al., 2009, p. 36).

Against this backdrop, one wonders what constitute reasonable goals for Israel education when conducted in classrooms and school auditoria far from Israel. If experiences, so much closer to the young person’s home, can be expected only to produce a weak simulacrum of a direct encounter with Israel itself, what purpose do they serve? Might the limited resources in schools be put to better use if their current investment produces, at best, a pale imitation of what can be achieved by other means? Are there different...
educational tasks for Diaspora schools in this field that are compelling in
their own terms and not only as alternatives to a trip to Israel?

Such questions have been raised by educators across the Diaspora
since, if not before, the creation of the State of Israel (see, e.g., Chazan
1979; Dushkin 1940; Elazar 1988; Fox 1968; Rosenak 1972–1973), but with
the outsized success of Birthright Israel—a sophisticated program that offers
young adult Jews an opportunity to participate, free of charge, in a 10-day
trip to Israel—these questions have become especially acute. With nearly
one-quarter of all U.S. and more than one-third of all Canadian young-adult
Jews in the relevant age cohorts taking part in the program (as estimated by
Saxe et al., 2008), schools can allow themselves to be much less concerned
about providing substitute programming for those who might never go to
Israel; today, their students have a ready opportunity to go.

What, in fact, North American Jewish day schools are doing when they
engage in Israel education, what shapes their practices, and to what ends,
were the core questions animating a multi-method study in which we
recently engaged. At a moment when, on the one hand, there is evidence,
albeit contested, of a distancing among Jewish North American young adults
from the State of Israel (Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Sasson, Kadushin, & Saxe,
2008), while on the other hand, there are unprecedented opportunities for
those young adults to encounter Israel directly, we wondered how school
leaders conceived of and conducted the task of educating young Jews about
Israel. Since the 1960s, Israel education has been a significant component of
Diaspora day school life outside the ultra-Orthodox community (Schiff,
1968), we wanted to know what form this component takes today and
toward what purposes.

This article joins a genre of educational literature that has asked with
disconcerting regularity what Israel education more generally is for; it thus
engages with a Jewish educational question that, as Chazan (2005) puts it,
“never seems to go away.” Framed in recent years by the debate among
sociologists and demographers about changing attachments to Israel among
Diaspora Jewry, and American Jewry especially (see Wertheimer, 2008, for
a succinct survey of these changes), this literature has sought to make
renewed educational meaning of Israel, toward various ends: for example,
as “a core element of Judaism and the collective Jewish experience wherever
it is lived” (Grant, 2008), so as to cultivate “social engagement” between
young Jews (Kopelowitz, 2005), as a vehicle for the “up-building of peace”
(Isaacs in press), or as part of an authentic Jewish “conversation” (Sinclair,
2003).

In this article, we focus specifically on the day school context; we are
concerned with delineating what schools are doing today and why. By asking
what accounts for these practices, we come to consider not only what has
brought them about but also what their purposes are. Thus, although our
primary concern is with analyzing what, organizationally and sociologically,
has shaped these practices, we come, through our analysis, to discuss what in educational terms these practices are for.

First, we describe the methodologies we employed. We then report on our major findings concerning what shapes schools’ practices and what makes up those practices. This account is organized around an analytical model which, we suggest, helps distinguish between what we call the vehicles, intensifiers, and conditions of day school Israel education. In the article’s final sections, we offer an interpretation of what these findings reveal about priorities and concerns in the field and about the roles of schools in nurturing a connection to Israel. As we will show, the tendency of day school Israel education increasingly to engage in or subcontract highly experiential programming, what one might call birthright-like practices, indicates a skewing of concern toward cultivating an emotional (often visceral) attachment to Israel over and above any intellectual engagement with Israel and Israel-related content.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of our study was what schools say they are doing and why. Reliant on self-reported data collected through a national survey of school leaders, we endeavored to extend the validity of what was learned by conducting site visits to schools. These visits were not so much opportunities to observe what schools were actually doing (and thereby triangulate quantitative data), rather, the visits were designed to extend or expand the range of voices of those to whom we listened (Creswell et al., 2003). We were interested in hearing how students, teachers, and parents understood what schools did and not just what heads-of-school reported they were doing. For this reason, as will be described in greater detail below, these visits were heavily dependent on a focus group methodology, although when there were opportunities to observe Israel education in action, our field researchers seized on the chance to do so.

The study employed three primary research tools. First, a questionnaire about schools’ practices in the field of Israel education was sent to 301 schools identified as Reform, Conservative, Community, or modern-Orthodox. (The starting-point for identifying schools was Schick’s AVI CHAI Foundation database of day schools, available at http://www.avi-chai.org/participating.pdf.) The questionnaire was not sent to centrist-Orthodox schools or to schools further to the religious right since it was assumed that the lack of interest in Israel education in these schools would overshadow the practices of those who do engage with this field. Administered online and purposefully brief so as to improve response rates, the questionnaire was made up of 12 closed and 2 open-ended questions that asked about schools’ purposes and policies, their educational and organizational practices, their programs, and what they identified as their successes and challenges in the field.
An invitation to complete the survey was sent by e-mail up to four times to heads of school, asking them to complete the responses or to solicit a relevant faculty member to do so. These repeated efforts produced a 47% response rate from schools whose composition generally corresponded to the makeup of the originally identified sample in terms of denomination, age-level, and size. Thus, we received responses from 143 schools in total. These included: (a) 53 modern-Orthodox and 90 Community, Conservative and Reform schools or what we will call liberal schools; (b) 15 schools with grades K–6, 72 schools with grades K-8, 29 schools with grades 9-12, and 27 schools with grades K-12; and (c) 77 schools with 251–500 students, 22 schools with 501–1,000 students, and 6 schools with more than 1,000 students.

A second research strand involved identifying and trying to understand instances of best practice in the field that might serve as exemplars or points of reference for others. To this end, telephone interviews were conducted with more than 30 individuals deeply familiar with the field of Israel education—, “connoisseurs,” as they are called in a wide variety of research literature (Magolda & Ebben 2007; Misch, 2002). These connoisseurs were asked to identify schools that had developed innovative programs in Israel education; were well-known for being Israel-rich environments; were regarded as pursuing a thoughtful and well-articulated approach to Israel education; and were led by a reflective and stable team of lay and professional leaders.

The connoisseurs’ suggestions generated a list of some 60 schools from across the continent. This sample was then progressively winnowed by conducting follow-up correspondence and conversations with nominated school heads and others. This process produced a sample of 15 schools from all denominations and regions of North America, of different grade levels and sizes, and whose leadership was receptive to serving as sites for field research.

A team of three researchers, consulting regularly with one another and with the project coordinators, then conducted 24–48 hour field visits to each of these schools so as to learn about their goals for Israel education, the practices in which they engage, and what they perceive to be their successes and challenges. In order to be time efficient, these visits were scaffolded around a series of focus groups with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and lay leaders. As indicated above, this strategy was intended not so much to triangulate quantitative data as to expand it through exposure to a greater variety of informants.

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1We classify religiously liberal schools in this way because our data indicate that there is no observable difference between Community, Conservative, and Reform streams with respect to how they engage in Israel education.
The researchers crafted 6–10 page reports about each of their visits. Their reports then served as qualitative data sources—transcripts—that made it possible to craft an interpretative account of commonplace as well as exceptional practices in the field. Conceiving of the reports as transcripts in this way was modeled on Lee’s (2002) application of a qualitative hermeneutics to multiple investigative reports that themselves were composed with data collected using qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies.

A third and final research strand involved conducting a comprehensive study of curricula used to teach about Israel in North American day schools. An analytical tool was developed to examine curricula produced by commercial presses or by not-for-profit organizations over the last 10 years and that are still available for purchase or acquisition. The tool, adapted from Ben Peretz, Katz, and Silberstein’s (1982) curriculum item repertory and from Isaacs’ (in press) taxonomy of orientations to Israel education, was aimed at making explicit the pedagogical approach, content focus, and ideological orientation of curriculum materials designed for use in schools. In this way, the tool was specifically intended to make explicit the foci of Israel education in the day school classroom.2

FINDINGS

The Practices of Israel Education

CONGESTED TERRAIN

Many of the most powerful moments of day school education are concerned with Israel. Some of the many examples our researchers heard about from students, teachers and parents include participating in student-led celebrations of Yom Haatzmaut or Yom Hazikaron [Israel Independence Day and Memorial Day]; performing in a Hebrew version of a Broadway musical; working for many hours on a science project with a fellow student from a partner school in Israel; designing a PowerPoint presentation with the help of a skilled history teacher that places recent Israeli military operations in historical context; taking a semester-long high school elective on contemporary Israeli literature.

These experiences span the disciplines of the formal curriculum but also include co-curriculum settings, after school, and on weekends and vacations. Designed in house by teachers and sometimes by students, these experiences are supplemented by a barrage of programs and opportunities that are offered to schools by outside providers so as to enhance the Israel education they supply. Apart from a multitude of curriculum packages (of which more than

2A searchable catalogue of our findings is accessible at http://virtualmelton.huji.ac.il/course/view.php?id=49
70 are currently available to schools), we indentified more than 40 further programs and products of this variety. Indeed, we suspect that there are few if any other aspects of the day school experience that are so well endowed.

Some sense of the great variety of programs and experiences that constitute this field is provided by the following account composed by a high school senior who wrote to our research team when she was unable to attend a focus group that our field-researchers had run in her school.

Israel is taught in many different ways at XXX. The sophomore year history curriculum is European history, and second semester is devoted to Israel, the Mid-East, and Zionism. Lashon/Ivrit [Hebrew] classes teach stories or poems, many of which are either written by Jews, Israelis, and/or Zionists. Hebrew literature is taught with a Zionist angle, and with Israeli history in mind . . . Juniors and seniors are required to take a Jewish History class, which goes through Israeli history . . .

As far as extra curriculars go, there are Yom Haatzmaut programs, Yom Hazikaron programs, and of course, preparation for the Israel Day Parade. Various speakers are brought in throughout the year for assemblies to discuss current events and news related to Israel.

And there’s the Israel Awareness Commission. We run weekly meetings either discussing Israeli history or current events, and getting students’ opinions on the latest news. We use newspaper articles to start the talks, or documentaries, online videos (from Palestinian Media Watch) or even news videos. In the past we’ve used sources provided by The David Project, and most recently from StandWithUs, an Israel advocacy organization. In Commission meetings, we are sure to emphasize that Israel isn’t perfect and makes mistakes like every country, and its leaders are regular politicians, subject to scandal or setbacks like everyone else.

We run programs throughout the year that teach Israel in a fun way, because we know that not every student reads our IA bulletin board. For example, the Environmental Commission was running a “Green Day” program, so we partnered and had a segment labeled “Israel and the Environment.” . . . Through programs like these, we can display Israel in a more positive light, instead of just portraying it the way the media does: full of violence and instability.

Even Color War has an Israel theme, sometimes teams are named after different parts of Israel, and have to do research and presentations based on Israeli history.

In a few weeks we’ll be partnering with the Tzedakah Commission to raise charity for Sderot, and the IA commission will have a 30 minute presentation on what’s going on in Sderot, and the history surrounding its problems.
Though Israel isn’t officially a majority in our curriculum, it is brought up in many areas of our education, as well as in our numerous extra-curricular activities. Speaking of which, I would like to apologize for not answering you sooner, I’ve been very busy with the extra-curriculars XXX offers.

As researchers attempting to bring conceptual clarity to such a breathtaking variety of experiences inside and, even more so, outside the classroom, we have found it useful to distinguish first between what we call five *vehicles* that are employed for the purposes of Israel education. The notion of vehicles is intended to capture the instrumental quality of identifiable bodies of practice that serve as a means for conveying people to a different place. These vehicles are different from what we call *intensifiers*, a set of special agents present in some schools that act to increase the prevalence and power of the vehicles both as they are used individually and when they are deployed in combination with one another. In turn, the operation of the vehicles and intensifiers is shaped further by what we call the *conditions* of Israel education. These conditions determine in fundamental ways how schools engage in Israel education, but, unlike the intensifiers and vehicles, they are inherited institutional facts—circumstances—that school leaders can do little to change.

The relationships between the vehicles, intensifiers, and conditions are depicted in Figure 1. The specific features of these elements are then described below. As the model indicates, the elements of Israel education contribute to a set of outcomes in which the attitudinal—encouraging young people to be committed to and concerned with and about Israel—looms larger than cognitive or behavioral goals, as indicated by the font size in the “outcomes” column. This imbalance suggests, as we argue below, widespread anxiety among educators about the extent of student engagement with Israel.

**FIGURE 1.** A conceptual model of Israel education in North American day schools.
VEHICLES

The vehicles of Israel education consist of a set of commonly used practices employed by schools to realize, either by direct or indirect means, their particular goals for Israel education. The vehicles’ widely different forms reflect the multidimensional quality of Israel education, an activity that can involve, for example, nurture of an appreciation of Israel’s central place in Judaism and Jewish life; an understanding of the origins of the State of Israel and its contemporary experience; and meaningful life-long relationships with the State and people of Israel.

The vehicles consist of:

a. Israel trips. Numerous opportunities exist for students to spend time in Israel in programs ranging in length from two weeks to three years. The arrangement and focus of these programs vary greatly, from conventional tours of Israel that include some opportunities to meet with Israelis, to programs for living with and attending school with Israelis that also provide opportunities to tour. Many programs offer the option of combining an Israel experience with a visit to Eastern Europe and Holocaust sites, although, interestingly, this is always on the way to Israel and not on the way home.

b. Informal events. With widely varying differences in expertise and ambition, scale, and scope, schools celebrate and memorialize key moments in the history of the State of Israel. They also provide specially programmed events that can occur at almost any time of the day or week to explore, experience, and advocate some aspect of contemporary Israel. These programs take place on or off the school’s premises and involve every imaginable mix of young and adult participants.

c. Curriculum. Formal arrangements and educational materials exist for teaching about Israel in almost every subject area and discipline of the day school curriculum, in Jewish or general studies, Hebrew or English, at all age levels, and as discrete teaching units or integrated into other concerns. The delivery of curriculum is as likely to be mandated as to be a consequence of a teacher’s own special interest.

d. Personnel and professional development. Schools employ Israelis (or North Americans with particular commitments and skills) on short-, long-term, or permanent contracts so as to provide students with role models and resources that can connect them and the school to Israel. Additionally, they may provide professional development (locally or in Israel) for faculty so as to enhance their understanding, commitment, and interest in Israel and their capacity to teach about it, recognizing that teachers and other members of school staff are significant intermediaries through which students encounter Israel.

e. Partnerships and person-to-person relationships. Schools maintain relationships with Israeli schools and organizations to different degrees of intensity and extent. Connected by video, e-mail, and letter exchange, by
shared Internet sites such as Second Life, by visits to one another’s schools by individual or small groups of teachers, and by trips taken by large numbers of students in both directions, these relationships can be project focused, connected to an Israel trip or ongoing throughout a student’s day school career.

As will be evident, the design and implementation of each of these vehicles calls for often distinct educational and organizational skills, and produces distinct educational outcomes. Each vehicle also involves its own financial and opportunity costs. The differences between these inputs and outcomes have never been explored, however, nor has the potential that might exist in the careful and coherent combination of multiple vehicles. In the final sections of the article, we will return to the question of what can be inferred about the purposes of Israel education from the deployment of these vehicles and particularly from schools’ preference for those vehicles (trips, informal events, and person-to-person relationships) that in previous times were more characteristic of an Israel experience than of a Diaspora day school education.

**INTENSIFIERS**

In most instances, the vehicles of Israel education are employed in uncoordinated or silo-like fashion; they may even compete with one another for resources and students’ attention. Frequently, therefore, these instruments of Israel education are employed at discrete moments in time with little connection to what comes before or after; they are taken on as the projects of independent cadres of individuals (students, faculty, or specially hired professionals) who do not coordinate or even communicate with the rest of their colleagues and peers. Furthermore, the vehicles are not deployed in a developmentally sensitive fashion with some sense of continuity from one year to the next. Instead, there is at best an annual cycling through experiences that often possess great power but that also struggle to overcome a sense of déjà vu among students.

It seems, however, that there are some factors that ameliorate the fragmented quality of schools’ practices and that intensify the operation of these vehicles so that their total effect is potentially greater than the sum of their parts. The survey data point to two such factors: an Israel oriented or Zionist mission and the presence of an Israel coordinator in the school. The qualitative data highlight, in addition, the intensifying role of a visionary leader.

a. Mission. Site visits revealed that although many schools do not invest time in crafting their own mission statement and simply reproduce the language proposed by the AVI CHAI Foundation, possessing such a
statement, no matter how superficially crafted, is correlated with intensified use of the vehicles of Israel education. The difference is most starkly observed within the sample of liberal day schools where more than a quarter of schools (26 of 90) is not explicitly committed to a Zionist or Israel-connected mission, unlike modern-Orthodox schools where only 2 of 53 schools did not lay claim to such a mission.

Liberal schools with a Zionist mission are much more likely to employ a coordinator of Israel education, provide an Israel trip for students, and employ Israelis on short-term contracts as informal educators. These schools are also more likely to require their students to take a discrete course about Israel, develop their own Israel curriculum, and participate in an ongoing relationship with Israeli institutions and schools. Whether possessing a mission contributes to such outcomes or is a shared consequence of some other factor is not indicated by the quantitative data. Site visits do indicate, however, that when schools articulate a set of publicly shared goals that go beyond sweeping or vague affective outcomes, these goals can serve to guide the development of programs and curriculum, and the allocation of teaching resources, in particular that of teaching time.

b. An Israel education coordinator. A disproportionate number of the schools that connoisseurs recommended as worth visiting employ individuals assigned to coordinate the many aspects of their Israel related activity; this person’s workload is usually equivalent to between a fifth and half of their time. Quantitative data show that in schools where there are more than 250 students, the presence of such personnel is significantly correlated with the provision of Israel-related learning and experiences. In fact, the larger the school, the greater the coordinator effect. Those “bigger” schools that employ a coordinator are more likely to require their students to take a discrete course about Israel, provide an Israel experience, participate in an ongoing relationship with Israeli institutions and schools, and employ Israelis on short-term contracts as informal educators. It seems that while the coordinator may, in some sense, relieve others in the school community of the responsibility for Israel programming, their appointment is more productive than an alternative that presumes, for well-intentioned reasons, that “everyone is responsible” for Israel education, regardless of their particular appointment. In the latter case, Israel education may, in fact, end up as nobody’s responsibility.

c. Visionary leadership. Unlike the presence or absence of an Israel coordinator or a Zionist mission, the contribution of visionary leadership to Israel education in schools is hard to capture with quantitative data, at least in

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3The much reproduced AVI CHAI Foundation (2005) formulation is: “The creation of the State of Israel is one of the seminal events in Jewish history. Recognizing the significance of the State and its national institutions, we seek to instill in our students an attachment to the State of Israel and its people as well as a sense of responsibility for their welfare” (p. 21).
terms of the survey we employed. This kind of leadership (leadership that Bryk & Driscoll (1985) characterize as “compass setting”) is most discernable in those schools that sail against the prevailing winds of communal norms in order to deliver Israel education that is radically different from equivalent institutions either in the same community or in other parts of the country. In liberal Jewish high schools, an issue that calls for this kind of leadership is the question of if and when to schedule a semester-in-Israel program. In the competitive world of private high school recruitment, the one asset that is more valuable than any other is a school’s record of where its graduates have gone to college. This fact of life has led the majority of liberal high schools to delay their Israel programs until the last months of grade 12, after college applications are (successfully) concluded. Schools fear that scheduling a program any earlier would jeopardize their students’ academic prospects even though scheduling it at that time means that returning students have barely any opportunity to contribute to school life.

Two of the schools that our team visited exhibited what can only be called fearlessness about such matters. In one school, more than a third of grade 10 students take up an option of spending three months living in Israeli students’ homes and attending their schools, while another one-third of students spend three weeks in Israel during the middle of the year. On the other side of the country, a different liberal high school runs two trips to Israel, first, a two-week trip during the early weeks of grade 9 in which all students participate, and then a semester-long program during the last months of grade 12 in which more than 90% take part. In both cases, the commitment to programs that so much depart from the norm elsewhere are widely attributed by members of the school community to the inspiration and organization of the head of school and his reframing of what might be perceived as a challenge or problem in to a signature feature of the school’s appeal.

In elementary schools the issue that calls for similar qualities of leadership concerns the centrality of the Hebrew language across the curriculum. Most day schools have abandoned a once widely held aspiration to conduct the bulk of their Judaic studies curriculum in Hebrew, and yet in a small number of instances—frequently against all circumstantial odds—there are schools that continue to insist on employing only Judaic faculty (and even senior leadership) who can deliver such a program. In these instances the contribution of the school leader through modeling, values-driven decision making and clarity of purpose sustains a set of practices that most other schools have found it more convenient to abandon.

In a Jewish day school system where almost 40% of schools enroll fewer than 100 students (Schick, 2009), individual leaders with vision can exercise special influence on school culture and practice. In such a system,
where small schools are the norm, the potentially transformative impact of individual leaders constitutes a particular opportunity for advocates of Israel education.

**CONDITIONS**

Our research reveals that some of the factors shaping Israel education in day schools are less the product of purposeful intervention and more the consequence of inherited circumstance. These fixed conditions—which include the school’s denominational affiliation, its age level, size, and history—are usually overlooked by advocates for programmatic innovation and school change, but they produce important differences between the ways schools go about their work.

a. **Denomination.** More than any other factor, a school’s denominational orientation influences its approach to Israel education. Reform, Conservative, and Community day schools exhibit sharp differences from modern-Orthodox schools in this respect. Liberal schools are: 50% more likely to run some kind of trip to Israel for their students; more than twice as likely to use commercially produced curriculum to teach about Israel—rather than rely on school-developed efforts; half as likely to employ Israelis on short-term contracts as either teachers or informal educators; and almost twice as likely to run professional development about Israel education for their faculty.

When one compares those modern-Orthodox schools and liberal schools that organize Israel trips, the differences are even sharper. When schools that provide Israel trips were asked to identify which of their programs has greatest impact on their students’ connection to Israel, 85% of the liberal schools identified the trip. Of course, this is not surprising: the trip is a high cost program that in a short space of time provides students with an experience of great emotional intensity. However, when modern-Orthodox schools that run trips were asked the same question, only 30% of them pointed to this program. Instead, the 70% of modern-Orthodox schools (and the 15% of liberal schools) that don’t mention the trip referred to programs that celebrate significant moments in the Jewish calendar, pointed to the relationships students develop with Israeli faculty, and, in a few instances, identified aspects of the curriculum that have impact over time. In these schools, it seems, the Israel trip may be a peak experience, but it is not an exceptional or irreplaceable one. By contrast, we sense that in many liberal schools, the two or four weeks in Israel (or one semester for some high schools) loom large over the other 4, 7, or 12 years of day school education. Evidently, the balance of Israel education in these schools is quite different from that in most modern-Orthodox schools.

b. **Age level.** Although less consistently impactful than denomination, the grade level of schools also exerts an influence on how they engage in
Israel education. Not surprisingly, no K–6 schools run school trips to Israel, whereas more than 60% of all middle and high schools do. Schools with higher grade levels are much more likely to schedule a required course about Israel. High schools are also most likely to employ an Israel coordinator; presumably this is so as to bring some coherence to what might otherwise be a highly fragmented educational experience, but it may also be correlated with our finding that high schools are much more likely than K–6 or K–8 schools to have a Zionist mission, for reasons that are obscure. K–6 schools, however, are more likely than schools with higher grades to employ informal educators from Israel. This reflects, we suspect, the low stakes and high benefits involved today in employing B’not Sherut, Israeli women who come to work in schools and communities as part of their national service. Schools report that employing B’not Sherut proves a cost-effective way of bringing a “flavor of Israel” especially to younger students.

c. School size. Less predictably, there is evidence that a school’s size also makes a difference to how it goes about some aspects of Israel education. Size does not appear to be a proxy for grade level or wealth since there are some especially small high schools and there are also some very well funded smaller schools, but it seems that the smallest schools (those with 250 students or fewer) are least likely to engage in the two practices most characteristic of high schools, these being, providing a trip to Israel or employing an Israel education coordinator. The bigger schools meanwhile (those with more than 500 students), are more likely to engage in activities that are associated with greater cost, such as participating in professional development whether provided locally or in Israel. Thus, 40% of the smallest schools report having not held at least 10 days of Israel related professional development in the last five years. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that smaller schools engage in Israel education less intensively than bigger schools, but rather that they are likely to employ different vehicles.

d. History. Our qualitative data point to one last condition that shapes the way schools go about Israel education: their institutional history. In some instances there is strong evidence that past practices and previously taken decisions continue to influence how schools approach the task of Israel education today. A striking example of this phenomenon is provided by a Solomon Schechter elementary school that we investigated where, for the last six years, the school has organized a two-week trip for grade 8 students during their last semester in school. The school commits funding to ensure that all students participate. For the last three years, a parent-donor has fully underwritten the participation of over 100 staff members in the Kivunim summer program for teachers and staff in Israel. Two years ago, the head of school led a summer trip to Israel for students’ families, which will be run again this year. Staffing decisions in
Judaic studies reflect also a commitment to making Hebrew a central feature of the curriculum. While some of what takes place in the school can be attributed to the impact of a head of school for whom Israel is central to his personal Jewish commitments, it turns out that many of the initiatives described here are funded by board members who are themselves graduates of the school, and today are the grandparents of current students. Their investment in Israel’s central place in the school is a product of their own parents’ determination to make Israel a signature feature of the school they founded more than 50 years ago. Such decisions—to highlight the importance of the Hebrew language, to build relationships with Israeli partners, to employ a visible minority of Israelis in the school—even when taken by previous leaders, and sometimes many years earlier, can become such core features of a school’s identity that they can continue to live on as nonnegotiable commitments.

**WHAT’S NOT IN THE MODEL**

Before turning to an analysis of the goals that give purpose to these conditions, intensifiers and vehicles, it is important to note one factor that does not appear in the model but that exercises a profound influence on what Israel education looks like in schools even though it is not itself a component or dimension of the schools themselves. As Wertheimer (2007) has shown to great effect, “Jewish educational arrangements vary greatly by community,” or to put it differently, local community culture can exercise a profound and distinctive influence on how Jewish education is conducted. This is certainly the case as far as day school Israel education is concerned, as two examples will demonstrate.

Local Jewish federations across North America are formally partnered with Israeli communities through programs such as the Jewish Agency’s Partnership 2000 framework. The implementation of these programs is uneven, to say the least. But where these relationships are well-funded, multigenerational, and multi-institutional, as in Los-Angeles/Tel Aviv and Boston/Haifa, local day schools benefit not only from the greater availability of resources for building sustained relationships with Israeli schools, they operate in a local culture where such relationships are expected and valued by parents and professionals, and they can draw on local expertise about how to nurture them. The vehicles for Israel education that schools in these communities can employ are significantly influenced by local circumstances in this respect.

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4We debated at length among ourselves and with colleagues whether the communal context should be included in the model. We prefer to omit it because its roots are firmly located beyond the school, as part of a larger environment that also includes the larger national scene and the much discussed place of Israel in American Jewish life.
A similar dynamic is observed in a community like Toronto, where a continued Hebraist influence has combined with a broader culture of bilingualism to sustain a community-wide commitment to employing an *Ivrit B’Ivrit* approach [teaching Judaic studies in Hebrew] across elementary schools of a variety of denominations as well as in to high schools. This commitment places strains on teacher recruitment efforts and seems to stimulate a willingness to employ *shlichim* [contract faculty from Israel]. It would appear that so powerful is this norm within this particular community that any school departing from it is seen as less educationally serious than its competitors.

**THE PURPOSES OF ISRAEL EDUCATION**

A full determination of what are, what might be, and what should be the purposes of Israel education in day school go beyond the remit of the research described here. A comprehensive analysis of what currently are schools’ goals in this field calls for intensive sociological and ethnographic research that can tease out the meaning of people’s practices not only from listening to how they describe them but also from observing how they enact them. The questions of what might and should be the purposes of Israel education call for the kind of philosophical deliberation in which some of our colleagues have recently been productively engaged (see, e.g., Grant, 2008; Isaacs, in press), but these are not questions we will explore here.

Here we engage in a more modest exercise that involves looking at what schools declare to be their purposes and at what their organizational choices (in terms of which vehicles of Israel education they tend to deploy) indicate about their purposes. In empirical terms, we draw on what the survey data tell us about school leaders’ perceptions of their successes and of the challenges that prevent them realizing their goals. We also turn to what our field researchers learned more informally about schools’ purposes from interviewing stakeholders at all levels of the sites they visited, as well as what they were able to learn from documents and artifacts they collected from schools.

To state it succinctly, most day schools articulate vague or imprecise goals for Israel education. As indicated above, many schools have co-opted the AVI CHAI Foundation formulation regarding the centrality of Israel to contemporary Jewish life. More often than not, this carefully crafted statement is not then connected to more immediate or school-specific educational goals.

Most typically, schools talk of cultivating a love for or commitment to Israel, outcomes as likely to be declared by elementary as by high schools. They thereby promise sweeping affective outcomes, but do not identify more proximate or nuanced sets of goals that can serve to guide the development of programs and curriculum, and the allocation of resources. In
many instances, Israel education begins and ends with the goal of cultivating attachment or commitment to Israel.

There are numerous factors that make the articulation of clear and constructive goals difficult for day school Israel education. First, it is not clear whether Israel education is itself a field. What, for example, are its core texts and experiences (other than spending time in Israel); what should educated students know, understand or do; and what is Israel education ultimately for; the intensification of Jewish identity and/or intrinsic purposes concerned with the State and people of Israel? In many communities, the outcomes of Israel education are contested: in modern-Orthodox schools there is debate about whether to educate for aliya [emigration to Israel] and if so, what alternative goals are appropriate for the great majority of students who will fall short of this ultimate purpose; in liberal schools, there is ambivalence or conflict about the purpose of Israel education when teachers and parents may be uncomfortable with Israel’s policies and actions. Under these circumstances, “constructive ambiguity” about educational goals makes it possible for families and faculty who have come together for a wide range of reasons to achieve some measure of accommodation. Ambiguity enables them to “keep politics out” of their interactions and out of the classroom, even if it undermines the purposefulness and productiveness of their educational endeavors. Finally, even in schools where there is a wholesale commitment to Israel and Israel education, there is uncertainty about what constitute appropriate goals. On the one hand, schools question the appropriateness of educating for anything other than unconditional support for Israel when, as one head of school put it, “we don’t pay Israeli taxes or serve in the army.” On the other hand, educating for unconditional support is seen to be difficult when, as a different head pithily expressed it, “Israel makes it so hard to love her.” Schools struggle, therefore, for a host of wholly understandable reasons to determine what the appropriate goals of this endeavor are.

Few pieces of data better capture these uncertainties than a carefully written response composed by a head of school in answer to a question about the greatest challenges his school faces in this field:

The major challenge . . . is to what purpose? Is our Israel education program designed to serve as a series of building blocks to a culminating experience of the senior trip? Is our Israel education designed to provide our students with tools to deal with anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses? Should our Israel education be designed to make the “gap year” part of the school’s culture? Is there a way to make Israel education and going to Israel part of a means of rejuvenating Jewish Life on our school campus upon their return?

Ironically, while many schools exhibit uncertainty and ambiguity about their goals, there is no doubting the general thrust of their practice, and what
appears to be its intent. Some sense of this is provided by the responses to one of the open-ended questions in the school survey. When asked what aspects of day school education have the greatest impact on students’ connection to Israel, the great majority of respondents pointed to programs and interventions that occur outside the classroom spaces where their students spend the bulk of their time. They point to special calendar events and ceremonies, relationships with Israelis working in their schools or in partner communities, and, of course, their programs in Israel. As seen in Table 1, other than at the lowest grade levels where schools do not provide trips to Israel, and where Israel education is centered in the Hebrew language classroom, Israel education is perceived to have its greatest power when conveyed by the vehicles of informal or experiential education.

The materials that schools use in the classroom also tend to be heavily skewed toward what can be called an “experiential” rather than a “cognitive” perspective. Having analyzed more than 70 sets of curriculum for teaching about Israel published over the last 10 years by commercial or not-for-profit publishers, we found that these programs predominantly emphasize their relevance to the students’ lives and experiences rather than focus on abstract concepts or academic content. These programs eschew teaching-for-understanding and instead try to cultivate an emotional or personalized response.

These findings raise the possibility that in the field of Israel education we are witnessing a similar change to one previously called for in congregational education, a shift to a paradigm of “enculturation” from one of “instruction” (Aron, 1987). Enculturation, according to Aron, constitutes the broadly conceived task of introducing children into a set of values and norms and initiating them into a culture and its commitments. Instruction is a more narrowly conceived task that assumes the child’s preexisting commitment to a culture and society; it is concerned with helping children

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5In designing the survey, we engaged in extensive discussion about how to frame this particular question without cueing respondents to focus on one particular aspect of Israel education’s many dimensions. Ultimately, we found through piloting the tool that the term “connection” was seen not only to indicate person-to-person relationships but also engagement with textual/historical material and some appreciation of Israel’s place in the Jewish past and present.
acquire knowledge of the ideas and skills that society values. Enculturation, Aron argues, is advanced by providing young people with well-conceived and positive Jewish experiences; instruction occurs typically within the walls of the classroom in an interaction between the teacher and learner. In recent years, many congregational schools have followed Aron down the enculturative route, abandoning the classroom and embracing the practices of experiential education.

When it comes to Israel education, day schools also seem to be engaged in enculturative work. Both liberal and modern-Orthodox schools are seeking to cultivate commitments and inculcate values by providing students with formative experiences. They are more likely, for example, to run Israel trips than to offer a required course about Israel. This is no small matter, since, conventionally, schools have been sites for instruction rather than enculturation; instruction is what most teachers are trained to do; enculturation is what educators do in youth movements and camps. It seems, however, that schools are simply not ready to assume that students’ commitments are firm enough that, as educators, they can focus on instruction.

A different indicator of this enculturative turn and of the impulses behind it can be seen in what can only be described as the conquest of Jewish high schools by Israel advocacy programs. The David Project, founded in 2002, and today the most prominent purveyor of an advocacy approach, claims that its program is being used in more than 100 schools—constituting about one-third of modern-Orthodox and liberal day schools (David Project, 2009). At least half-a-dozen other organizations operate in this territory where they promise outcomes such as “to prepare Jewish teens for the anti-Israel sentiment they will face on campus . . . and to empower [them] with concrete skills, advocacy training and the ability to respond to anti-Israel rhetoric in an intelligent and informed manner”; this from the Caravan for Democracy, surprisingly perhaps, “an initiative of the [Jewish National Fund] JNF” (JNF, 2009).

In our view, the advocacy vogue betrays a loss of self-confidence. Ostensibly concerned with preparing students to persuade others of the case for Israel, curriculum analysis and site-based interviews reveal that these efforts are no less intended to convince day school students themselves of Israel’s merits. These programs look more like a case of inreach than outreach. Indeed, given that only a small portion of the graduates of these programs can assume leadership of the Israel advocacy fight on campus (after all, how many leaders is there room for?), one presumes that these programs are concerned less with producing leaders and more with fortifying the hearts and minds of the rank and file ahead of their “coming of age” on campus. To that extent, their intent is to inculcate a set of positive Israel-oriented values in day school graduates.

The tendencies seen in the focus on advocacy at high school are evident in elementary schools in what might best be described as a “dumbing
down” of Israel education so as to ensure, above all, that students graduate with a positive feeling about Israel. In these terms it is reasonable (so one of our researchers was told) to advise the latest B’not Sherut recruits that “what they teach is not as important as who they smile at.” Schools, thus, try hard to make children feel good about Israel, but attach less importance to what they learn and understand about it.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have indicated above, Israel education is a multidimensional activity. By definition, it is a field of educational practice that is not easily confined to the classroom. The vehicles of Israel education extend into and emerge from every dimension of school life; its practices challenge the conventional structures of schools as institutions that, historically, were not places where young people learned and developed attitudes about the Land and State of Israel. In previous times, those understandings and emotions came from the home, the synagogue and other places where young people came together in organized fashion.

The field of day school Israel education is institutionally congested, programmatically dynamic, and, often, politically contested. In some respects, it almost defies generalization. Our fieldwork has taken us to schools where we have learned about educational practices that are compelling, age appropriate, sustainable, and highly thoughtful. At the same time our research provides evidence of patterns that suggest confused educational purposes, uncoordinated practices, and a heavy reliance on particular educational forms. Our identification of discrete vehicles for Israel education brings in to view a tendency to employ some vehicles rather than others. In taking stock of our findings we highlight three phenomena, recognizing the partialness of these conclusions and their origins in our own particular interests and concerns.

First, in relation to purpose, there is accumulating evidence that across the plurality of liberal and modern-Orthodox schools, Israel education today is designed first and foremost to win over a disinterested and disconnected audience, even if that audience comes from families located close to the core of the affiliated community, as indicated by their readiness to pay many thousands of dollars for their children’s Jewish schooling. We wonder, in fact, if families have lost confidence in their capacity to cultivate attachment to Israel and have subcontracted the task to schools.

Second, in relation to practice, the great educational strength of day school education ordinarily comes from its cumulative effect; from the fact that, over time, students are socialized in a covenantal Jewish community and have an opportunity to wrestle with Jewish ideas and concepts. It seems, however, that when it comes to Israel education, many schools
depend on vehicles that deliver an instant or exceptional experience. Not surprisingly, they often turn for these things to external or specialist providers more experienced than they in such matters. This model, in form and content, is not unlike that used by Birthright Israel.

Third, in relation to overall balance, in high schools especially, Israel education has become closely associated with Israel advocacy. With schools having been assigned responsibility for cultivating knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to Israel, the tasks of Israel education have become increasingly focused on preparation for a singular, time-limited performance: advocacy for Israel during the few years that students spend on university campuses.

To characterize this development in provocative terms, we suggest that the relationship between Israel advocacy and Israel education is not unlike the relationship between Bnei Mitzvah preparation and the rest of Jewish education. For many 12- and 13-year-old Jews, Jewish education has come to mean preparing for a single, time-limited, and spatially bounded performance. Israel education too has also come to focus on such a moment; also a coming of age experience, but on campus rather than in the synagogue. In saying this we do not intend to minimize the importance of Israel advocacy. The skills of Israel advocacy in the Diaspora are perhaps more important today than ever. But we want to highlight how this skill is much less meaningful if acquired as a kind of rote exercise and intended for use on just one occasion in one’s life.

These three phenomena—in relation to purpose, practice and focus—suggest a field of educational activity lacking in equilibrium and balance, one being pushed and pulled in very particular directions. Our analytical model of Israel education in day schools can serve, we suggest, as a useful tool for practitioners, helping institutions identify the imbalances or lack of coherence in their work, and pointing also to levers for doing things differently. It can help schools see how resources invested in certain intensifiers can have impact across a number of vehicles whereas those resources when invested directly in vehicles can result in highly circumscribed outcomes. For researchers, we hope, it can provide a set of concepts and categories for navigating a field of practice whose complexity often seems to resist systematic investigation. Indeed, it may invite investigation of which specific outcomes are cultivated by which particular elements (or vehicles) of Israel education. Such data can certainly help schools conduct their work in more measured fashion.

REFERENCES


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