Assessing Day School Students’ Knowledge of Zionism:
Shifting from a Deficit Model to an Inventory Model

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Introduction: Israel in the Jewish Day School

At one American Jewish elementary school, each new week begins with a school-wide assembly, and each assembly begins as students sing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem. Across town, students at a second Jewish elementary school belt out the same words as part of their daily morning circle. And at a third Jewish school nearby, the children also know this anthem; they sing it every Friday as part of their weekly prayer service.

In each of these schools, the rhythm of children’s lives is interlaced with symbolic engagement with the Jewish State (Kopelowitz, 2005; Pomson, Wertheimer, & HaCohen Wolf, 2014). But what do the children actually know about Israel and Zionism?

For many adults in the Jewish community, the answer to this question has high stakes. Expressing anxiety that the next generation of American Jews may not be as connected to Israel as their progenitors, scholars and Jewish communal leaders have exerted great efforts to measure and bolster attachment to Israel (e.g., Cohen & Kelman, 2007; Saxe, Phillips, Sasson, Hecht, Shain, Wright, Kadushin, 2009). In this context, Israel education is often viewed as a bulwark against the rising tides of detachment and ambivalence (e.g., Bryfman and Cohen, 2015), and thus has become an increasingly integral part of the enterprise of American Jewish education (Horowitz, 2012; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012).

Jewish educational institutions—and Jewish day schools in particular—have come to bear an increasing burden of responsibility for fostering in Jewish youth both an understanding of and sense of attachment to Israel (Pomson, 2010; Pomson, Deitcher, & Held, 2011). Because day school students are, by definition, actively engaged in organized Jewish life, and because it is often assumed that they will “play a leading role in Jewish life when they come of age”
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(Pomson, Wertheimer, & HaCohen Wolf, 2014, p. 35), day schools shoulder both the hopes and fears of an American Jewish community seeking to connect its progeny to the Jewish State.

Yet day school Israel education has often been marked by a confusion of goals and purposes (Zakai, 2011; Pomson, Deitcher, & Rose, 2009). On the one hand, there is general consensus that Israel is an important element of Jewish day school education. In fact, in many day schools, “parents and educators alike regard Israel as a valuable glue unifying the school community” (Pomson, Wertheimer, & HaCohen Wolf, 2014, p. 6). On the other hand, the place of Israel in the day school curriculum is often unclear (Gerber & Mazor, 2003), and “schools’ efforts are undermined by poorly coordinated and fragmented practices” (Pomson, Deitcher, & Rose, 2009, p. 7).

For children who learn in such a context, then, what constitutes their Israel knowledge and experience? What do children who have grown up in the Jewish day school system actually know about Israel and Zionism? And does their level of knowledge warrant the fearful hand wringing or the prideful boasting of American Jewish adults?

Assessing Students’ Israel Knowledge

In recent years, as Israel education has developed as a distinct subfield of Jewish education (Horowitz, 2012; Gerber and Mazor, 2003), educational institutions have witnessed an expansion and professionalization of Israel educational programming (Kopelowitz, 2015; Kopelowitz and Wolf, 2013). Despite this, little is known about what contemporary American Jews actually know and understand about Israel, because most existing studies have focused on the affective rather than the cognitive (e.g., Grant, 2008; Kadushin, Saxe, Phillips, & Sasson, 2009; Saxe & Boxer, 2012). As Annette Koren and her colleagues explain,
“Despite the flourishing educational and experiential programing, there is little empirical research that documents what Americans know about Israel, the Middle East, or Israeli/Palestinian issues…[even though] documenting what people know (and do not know) about Israel, the conflict, and the history of the region, is necessary for establishing the state of the field and building strong educational programs” (Koren, Fishman, Aronson, & Saxe, 2015, p. 2).

Existing research that does attempt to understand what American Jews actually know about Israel operates on a “deficit model” grounded in a theory of cultural literacy. This model, rooted the tradition of education reformers like E.D. Hirsch Jr. (1988), assumes that there is a body of knowledge that literate Jews must know about Israel (e.g., Troen & Fish, 2017). Experts in Israel Studies determine what constitutes that body of knowledge, and today’s American Jewish youth manifest a severe “information deficit” when measured against that body of knowledge (Koren, et. al., 2015, p. 20).

For example, the Brandeis University Israel Literacy Measurement Project (Koren, et. al, 2015) asks students a list of over 90 multiple choice questions about Israeli history, society, and politics. Sample questions include: Which one of the following countries has NOT been the source of a major wave of Jewish immigration to Israel? A. Poland B. Russia C. Chile D. Ethiopia and Jews make up approximately what percentage of Israel’s citizens? A. 60-69% B. 70-79% C. 80-89% D. 90-100%. When students fail to correctly answer these and other questions, it is assumed that they have a “less than acceptable level of knowledge about Israel” (Koren, et. al., 2015, p. 20). This finding is unsurprising given Wineburg’s (2001) assertion that standardized tests almost always find a deficit or deficiency in students’ understanding; this is, after all, what the tests were designed to find.
Yet a deficit model, in which students’ knowledge invariably comes up short, is not the only way to think about students’ knowledge of Israel. As philosopher of Jewish education Jon Levisohn (2016) asks, “Rather than devising an instrument that tells us the facts that students do not know, how might the landscape look different once we understood what students do know?” (p. 13). Here, Levisohn proposes the possibility of a second model for understanding students’ Israel knowledge, a model I call an inventory approach.

Like the language of deficit, inventory uses the metaphor of economics as a way of thinking about students’ knowledge and understanding. Yet while a deficit model measures students’ knowledge against an existing ledger, an inventory approach takes stock of whatever is in students’ cognitive warehouses. The primary tool of the former is the fixed-answer question (e.g., Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel?) whereas the latter employs open-ended questions (e.g., What do you know about Israel and its government?). A deficit approach assumes that facts are the building blocks of meaning; an inventory approach presumes that meaning is made only through larger schemata that allow learners to organize and contextualize information into a narrative or conceptual framework (Levisohn, 2016).

The current study asks: what does day school students’ knowledge of Zionism look like when viewed through the lens of a deficit model, and what does it look like using an inventory model? This chapter will demonstrate that day school students’ knowledge of Zionism appears to be woefully lacking if measured against an external standard of basic Israel literacy, yet is in reality rich and textured when assessed using students’ own ways of talking about making sense of the world. In doing so, it will suggest that day school educators hoping to improve Israel knowledge in their schools must take stock of students’ knowledge using child-friendly, open-ended assessment techniques.
Windows into Children’s Knowledge of Israel

To make this case, this chapter draws upon data from the Children’s Learning About Israel Project, a longitudinal study of Jewish day school students.1 By tracking a group of 35 children throughout the course of elementary school, the project aims to understand how these children think and feel about Israel, and how their thoughts and feelings about Israel develop or change over time.

The children were recruited from the Kindergarten classes of three Jewish day schools during the 2012-2013 school year. To date, the study has tracked these children for six years, so that at present, during the 2017-2018 school year, the children are in 5th grade.

The schools which these children attend were selected because they cater to different segments of the American Jewish community, making it possible to enlist participants who varied in their Jewish practices and affiliations, as well as their experiences and relationships to Israel. Thus, the schools represent different religious denominations within American Judaism: one is Reform, one Conservative, and one a non-denominational community school. The ethnic background of the schools’ typical families also varies; one has a large Persian-Jewish population, one has predominantly children of Ashkenazi descent, and one serves a large number of Israeli expatriate families.

By design, the children exhibit varying exposure to and experiences with Israel (see Table 1). Some of the children have never been to Israel, while others have visited for extended periods of time. Some have Israeli parents and/or relatives living in Israel; others do not.

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1 The Children’s Learning About Israel Project is a project of the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.
Although all of the children have been taught about Israel in some form during their day school education, their schools’ approaches to Israel education—including both the formal curriculum and Israel’s role in the school environment (c.f., Chazan, 1979)—differ widely.

To understand what the children know about Israel, we sought “windows into children’s thinking” (Wright, Bacigalupa, Black, & Burton, 2008; McGee, 1996): glimpses into the ways that the children themselves viewed Israel and made sense of its relationship to their own lives. Over the six years of this study, we peeked into the children’s minds through three “windows,” each of which—interviews, elicitation exercises, and storytelling exercises—was specifically designed for capturing the ways that children understand the worlds around and inside of them.

1. **Semi-structured interviews.** Interviews solicit demographic information about the participants and offer them a chance to reflect upon the ways that they understand, think, and feel about Israel. The interviews are semi-structured, based on a pre-written script but allowing for fluid conversation and follow-up probes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Gillham, 2005). The semi-structured nature of these interviews allows both focus and flexibility, each of which is useful when interviewing children (Drever, 1995). The questions we ask children vary from formal, e.g. “What is Zionism?” to playful, e.g. “If you were visited from someone from another planet, someone who spoke English and understood everything you were saying, but really didn't know anything about life on Earth, how would you explain to them what it means to be Israeli?”

2. **Photo and music elicitation exercises.** Children are asked to examine and discuss a variety of visual and audio prompts (c.f. Harper, 2002; Allett, 2010) that highlight different aspects of Israeli political, religious, and cultural life. Visual and audio prompts elicit both what participants see or hear, and also what is brought up for them internally when they interact with the prompt (Banks, 2001). When combined with interviews, photo and music elicitation
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exercises evoke responses from children that are more detailed and comprehensive than those provided by interviews alone (Collier, 1987; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2008). We show the children a map of the Middle East, Israeli and Palestinian flags, paintings of people praying at the Kotel and eating at a Tel Aviv cafe, an audio clip of the Israeli national anthem, and dozens of other visual and auditory stimuli as a way of eliciting what the children know and how they feel about different aspects of Israeli culture and society.

3. **Storytelling exercises.** Children are asked to tell stories about life in Israel, revealing how they view and explain the world. Storytelling is a “fundamental structure of human experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), one familiar to adults and children alike. For children in particular, telling stories can be a way of making sense of the world, serving as “a child’s way of exploring, inquiring, probing, and...playing her way into deeper understanding” (Lindfors, 2004, p. 149). We ask children to “tell us a story about how Israel became Israel” as a window into how they view Israeli history, and we ask them to “tell us a story about what’s been happening in Israel recently” as a window into how they understand current events.

Together, these “windows” offer myriad glimpses into children’s thoughts and feelings about Israel and how Israel factors into their own self-understanding as Jews. Data are coded in the spirit of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014), based on the children’s own categories and ways of speaking.

This chapter will examine a specific case from the larger data set: how the children understand Zionism.² This case illuminates how, in using a deficit approach to assessing Israel knowledge, day school students’ knowledge of Zionism appears to be troublingly weak. If, however, an inventory model is used, focusing not on the cultural literacy that children are

² A later draft may also include a second case, focused on how children understand the role of progressive Judaism in Israel.
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lacking but rather taking stock of what they do know, day school students appear to have a textured understanding of Israel, Zionism, and American-Jewish relations to both.

Day School Students’ Zionism Deficit

What is Zionism? Historical definitions frame Zionism as “the nationalist movement calling for the establishment and support of an independent state for the Jewish people in its ancient homeland” (Stanislawski, 2016, p. 1). More contemporary definitions, recognizing the current reality of such a state, define Zionism as a movement committed to “strengthening Israel as a Jewish...and democratic state” (Engel, 2009/2013, p. 1). Both ways of defining Zionism share a basic understanding that the movement highlights the “depth and intensity of the bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel” (Avineri, 2017, p. 1).

Zionism has long been understood as a “crucial issue” of Jewish life in the modern world (Herzberg, 1984/1997), and current scholarship on Zionism recognizes the importance of Diaspora Zionism, in which Jews living outside of the land of Israel play a unique role in shaping and responding to the development of Jewish statehood (Troy, 2018). Thus by any standard of cultural literacy, young Jews living in the United States should have at least a basic understanding of what Zionism is. Even if they cannot explain the differences between Political, Labor, Revisionist, Religious, Cultural, and Diaspora Zionisms, or how these strands have developed over time (Troy, 2018); even if they are entirely unaware of the existence of Christian Zionism (Spector, 2009); and even if they know nothing of the debate about whether Zionism has constituted a radical break from or a continuation of the Jewish past (Biale, 1986); they ought at the very least know that Zionism—historical and contemporary—is an ideological position that highlights the Jewish people’s connection to the land and State of Israel.
Can Jewish day school students in elementary school define Zionism at this very basic level? From a deficit approach, the answer appears to be: no. The ability of day school students in the Children’s Learning About Israel Project to define Zionism, even in the most basic sense of the word, is woefully lacking.

The vast majority of day school students in this study were entirely stumped by the question what is Zionism? Whether they were in Kindergarten, 4th grade, or in the intervening years, students struggled to answer the question what is Zionism?, not because they understood that the question itself has often been mired in disputes among its proponents (Shapira, 2012) and detractors alike (Engel, 2009/2013), but because many were unable to recognize the word itself.

A look at 3rd graders’ answers to the question what is Zionism? is instructive, as it shows how, at the midpoint of their elementary school learning, the children attempted to define Zionism. (See Table 2 for a complete record of students’ answers in 3rd and 4th grade).

Four of the 35 children in the study readily admitted that they had no familiarity with very term. “I don't know,” replied Isaac, “because I've never heard of the word Zionism.” Similarly, Jacob explained, “I don’t know that word,” and Tzvi insisted, “I don't know! I've never heard that word before.” It is important to note here that Isaac, Jacob, and Tzvi attend three different day schools. Their lack of familiarity with the term, which may appear jarring given their schools’ explicit commitment to Israel and Israel education, cannot be attributed to a single school’s inattention to Zionism in curriculum or programming.

The vast majority of these children’s classmates were unable to offer any definitions at all. They gave answers like Bella’s “I’m not sure,” Isabelle’s “I don’t know,” and Pearl’s “I have no clue.” Once again, these children attend three different day schools, and yet their responses
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are remarkably similar. Across the board, the 3rd graders in this study were unable to define Zionism, with only two children explicitly linking the term to anything Israel related. Dina, as a “random guess,” hypothesized that Zionism “has something to do with Israel...maybe believe in their people.” Hannah, who readily admitted, “I don’t know,” continued, “I think it might mean that different people from the world come to Israel.” Even these children, whose answers explicitly connected the term Zionism to Israel, admitted that they were guessing because of the larger context of an interview about Israel.

Yet it is not that the very term Zionism is an anathema to the elementary school context. Myriad curricular resources, including The Center for Israel Education’s *Israel: A Curriculum for Grades 2-7* (Center for Israel Education, 2015) and Torah Aura’s *Artzeinu: An Israel Encounter* (Grishaver, Barkin, and Blair, 2008), craft elementary school friendly definitions of Zionism. The third graders in this study, however, could neither define nor explain Zionism despite attending self-proclaimed “pro-Israel” day schools.

The children fared slightly better with their answers by the time they reached 4th grade. In that year, many of the children continued to insist that they were completely unaware of the term Zionism, such as Bella’s “I don’t think I’ve ever heard that before” or Olivia’s “I’ve never heard of Zionism.” Many others didn’t even hazard a guess as to what it means, such as Avigail’s “I’m not sure what Zionism is” or Dina’s “I actually don’t really know.” But beginning in 4th grade, a sizeable minority of students (eight of 35), including children from each of the day schools in this study, began to offer rudimentary definitions that explicitly linked Zionism to the Jewish people’s connection to the land or state of Israel.
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Consider, for example, the definitions of Keren and Tzvi, who attend different schools. While in 3rd grade Tzvi insisted that he had never heard of the word Zionism, in 4th grade he was able to explain,

“The root word Zion was the name of Israel before it actually became Israel. Well, it was Palestine…There was this guy who started this Zionist thing…He made something called the Zionist group, and lots of people wanted to do that because they wanted a Jewish state, somewhere they could settle instead of having to move from place to place and stuff. So what happened was, they had to, they became Zionist and ended up creating a Jewish State in 1948.”

Keren, when in 3rd grade, said that she did not know what Zionism was, but in 4th grade she spoke with great confidence, saying, “Zionism are people who want to help Israel…They fight against people who want to take over…. [A Zionist] is a person who wants to help Israel be a better place.” In Tzvi’s definition are signs of a rudimentary understanding of the historical roots of Zionism, and in Keren’s definition are echoes of contemporary definitions that characterize Zionists as supporters and defenders of the nation-state.

Even so, these children remained a minority; most of their classmates offered only guesses about what Zionism is, and their hypotheses were often wildly off the mark. For example, Isabelle confused Zionism with monotheism, and Hayim, Micah, Hannah, and Lailah all assumed it to be some kind of religion, likely hypothesizing based on the word ending “ism” as in “Judaism.”

Thus, by even the most generous measures, the 4th graders as a collective appear have a severe “deficit” in their Israel knowledge. Fewer than a quarter of the children, all of whom have received a Jewish day school education from schools whose missions explicitly mention Israel,
can offer a rudimentary definition of Zionism even as they near the end of their elementary school careers. On a test of basic Israel literacy, they would come up short.

**An Inventory of Day School Students’ Knowledge of Zionism**

Yet students’ knowledge of Israel can be understood another way. Using an inventory approach, it is possible to take stock of how students understand Israel and Zionism by looking at the ways that students craft accounts of Israel when they have an opportunity to narrate how they see the world. As Jonah Hassenfeld (2015) explains, “these accounts show not what they know, but how they use what they know to build [an] account that matters to them.” When looking at children’s narrative accounts, it becomes clear that as early as Kindergarten, day school students are grappling with Zionist ideologies; even though they cannot define the term Zionism, they adopt many of the ideas and beliefs of Zionists in rudimentary form.

The pages that follow explore data from spring of children’s kindergarten year, when the children had not yet completed even a single year of day school education (though some had previously attended Jewish preschools). The same children who could not define Zionism in third or fourth grade had begun to develop basic mental schema for understanding core Zionist tenets even at ages 5 and 6. Ideas central to Political, Labor, Revisionist, Religious, Cultural, and Diaspora Zionisms were evident in the children’s ways of speaking about Israel both as they responded to open-ended questions and as they reflected on specific visual and audio prompts. With only one exception, each child in the study was able to articulate a germinal understanding of at least one of these forms of Zionist ideology, and over half of the children (20 of 35) were able to articulate rudimentary conceptions of three or more of these forms of Zionist thought in the spring of Kindergarten.
At the center of Political Zionism lies the twin concepts of peoplehood and statehood. As Peretz Smolenskin, a Russian Jewish novelist of the late 19th century explained, “we are a people”; Jews share not only religious ties but national ones (Smolenskin 1875-1877 in Troy, 2018, p. 3). Because of these national ties, father of political Zionism Theodor Herzl insisted, Jews—like other nations of the world—deserve “sovereignty...over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation” (Herzl, 1896 in Troy, 2018 p. 15). In speaking about Israel, the Kindergarteners frequently used the language of both peoplehood and statehood. When asked what does Israel make you think about?, children replied with answers like, “the Jewish people” (Brent) or “all the Jewish people” (Gia). When asked what is Israel?, they responded with answers like “a Jewish state” (Hayim), “a small state for the Jewish people” (Lior), or “a Jewish home” (Gia). For many of these children, the concepts of peoplehood and statehood were inexorably linked. With echoes of the phrase “for a people without a land, a land without a people,” children like Owen explained that Israel is “a place for the Jews. It’s because that the Jews needed a place, needed their own country, but they didn’t have one.” There is much, of course, about political Zionism and its history that the children do not understand, but a basic schema for it exists in their minds even at age 5 and 6.

One of the tenets of Cultural Zionism is the idea that Hebrew is and should be “the simple, natural language of everyday life” in Israel (Ben-Yehuda, 1880 in Troy, 2018, p. 106). While the children generally understood that Hebrew “is their language they speak in Israel” (Rina), some were able to articulate an ideological position that wove Hebrew into the very fabric of Israeli society. As Avigail explained, it isn’t only that people in Israel “always only speak Hebrew” but that “Israel is meant for Hebrew.” Echoing the directive “Ivri daber Ivrit” (a

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3 For a discussion of the historical origins and development of this idea, both within and outside of early Zionist circles, see Garfinkle (1991).
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Hebrew speaks Hebrew),⁴ these children viewed Israel as a place where “Hebrew and Hebrew people live” (Hannah). For, as Ryan explained, Jews around the world might speak many languages, as he spoke English, but only Hebrew was the true language of the Israeli people. While none of the children were familiar with the phrase “Cultural Zionism,” even at age 5 and 6 they had begun to incorporate into their own stories about Israel the Cultural Zionist belief that Israel is and should be “made of Hebrew” (Avigail).

Among the principles of Revisionist Zionism is the importance of a “Jewish majority in Eretz Yisrael” (Jabotinsky, 1934 in Troy, 2018 p. 69). In its origins, this idea was aspirational, but contemporary iterations of Revisionist Zionist ideology view the successes of the modern state in light of an “Israel built around a cohesive and overwhelming Jewish majority” (Hazony, 2014 in Troy, 2018, p 394). Many of the Kindergarteners understood the concept of a Jewish majority, both as a demographic reality and as an ideological commitment of the Jewish State. These children understood three interrelated ideas about Israel’s majority Jewish population. First, the children knew that Israel is “full of Jewish people” (Dina). Second, many (but not all) of the children understood that, as Bella explained, Israel is “a place where Jewish people live,” and yet it is possible to live in Israel if you’re not a Jewish person, or outside of Israel (as she does) if you are Jewish. Third, the children recognized that Israel’s very character, in Brent’s words “why Israel is special,” is precisely because “there’s lots of Jewish people there.” For, as Caleb explained, “Israel is a safe place for Jews because there’s a lot of Jewish people [there].” While these children were familiar with neither the phrase Revisionist Zionism, nor any of its

⁴ The phrase “עברי דבר עברית! Ivri daber Ivrit!” originated in 1930s Palestine, as part of the Militia for the Protection of the Language’s campaign to encourage the use of Hebrew as the spoken language of the Yishuv (Shohamy, 2008; Halperin, 2014).
historical or contemporary advocates, they had internalized the Revisionist Zionist idea that Israel’s existence is contingent on a “Jewish majority in Eretz Yisrael.”

Religious Zionism hinges on the assumption that Israel’s “land, language, history, and customs are vessels of the spirit of the Lord” (Kook, 1910-1930 in Troy, 2018, p. 96) and should therefore be governed “on the basis of our heritage of Torah” (Bar Ilan, 1922 in Troy, 2018, p. 101). Echoing a religious Zionist ideology, many of the children described Israel as a place with a direct connection to God. Olivia called Israel “a country made by God,” Jacob labeled it “God’s favorite state,” and according to Caleb, “God made Israel, and then he made it safe.” Nomi described God as intervening on Israel’s behalf in wars, when “God is surrounding it with a big bubble.” Yet the children also understood that this connection to God, which made Israel “a very holy place” (Samantha), was enacted in its laws and customs. The children knew that the holidays celebrated in Israel include Jewish holidays (like Shabbat and Passover), and not only Israeli holidays (like Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut), and many could explain the ways that Jewish symbols are tied to Israeli ones (e.g. the Israeli flag’s relationship to a tallit). For these children, Israel’s character was a religious Jewish one, a place where “they study Torah” (Pearl) and where “there’s no shrimp, they don’t catch shark, they don’t catch squid, they don’t catch crab, they don’t catch lobster, no pig” (Hayim). They could not identify their own beliefs as Religious Zionist even in later grades, but as early as Kindergarten they embraced a Religious Zionist ideology that connected the State of Israel, the rituals of Judaism, and the intercession of the Divine.

Diaspora Zionism, at its core, revolves around the fact that it is possible to be both a passionate Zionist and a Jew living outside of the State of Israel. As Alan Dershowitz (1997 in Troy, 2018) explains, “I am a committed Zionist. I believe passionately in the Jewish state...But I
am an American, and I love America and believe in its future” (p. 480). This sentiment was shared by several of the Kindergarteners. In the words of Micah, America is “my state” and Israel is a place “I love.” Kevin described Israel as “our second country” and Rina, flipping the order, called Israel “my first favorite country…[and] here is my second favorite country, in America.” Ryan described the two countries as different teams, and when asked what team he was on, responded without hesitation: “both.” This idea was mirrored by Samantha’s insistence that “both sides are special in their own way.” Samantha imagined having formed a special connection to Israel in utero, “when I was in my mom’s tummy.” The other children could not describe when or where they formed this belief, but they knew, in Gia’s words, that “I’m in America…and Israel is a Jewish home.” Although the children had neither the language nor the conceptual sophistication of adults, they nonetheless embraced the dual commitments of Diaspora Zionism.

A few children even exhibited an inchoate conception of Labor Zionism, which in its contemporary form views Zionism as a “permanent revolution” constantly striving for economic and social justice (Avineri, 2017, p. 227). In this view, Zionism is “a call to recognize that in a world in which Jewish fortunes have radically changed, the best way to memorialize the history of Jewish suffering is through the ethical use of Jewish power” (Beinart, 2010 in Troy, 2018 p. 382). For the children who embraced this ideology, in nascent form, their entire conception of Israel revolved around “helping people” (Ryan) and “helping Israel to make it a better country” (Avigail). As Avigail explained at age 6, “Israel is counting on all the Jewish people. You have to make [Israel] a better place…and work and hard.” She and many of the other children envisioned their own labor—picking up trash on the street, visiting the hungry, feeding the sick, and building a more peaceful place—as contributions to the “ongoing project of nation building
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within the Jewish state” (Grant, 2010, p. 21). For, as Lior explained, the *making* of Israel was only the beginning; even now “we’re never going to give up. We’re going to build Yisrael.” The children could not have identified the Labor Zionist roots in their words and imagined deeds, nor did they situate this work in the belief that “Israel must be (and can be) a democracy that upholds human rights, including freedom of religion and conscience, along with the right to equality, while fulfilling the Jewish people’s right to self-determination” (Gavison, 2003 in Troy, 2018 p. 369). Nonetheless, they clearly understood the idea that Israel is both built and incomplete, established and constantly striving, and they imagined contributing their own labor to a project of continual betterment for Israeli society.

When viewed as a whole, it is clear that these children do not appear to be developmentally ready to define Zionism, or even recognize the word, before 4th grade at the earliest—even when they have had repeated exposure to Zionist ideology. Yet well before they can define Zionism or explicitly discuss its meanings—for most children as early as Kindergarten—they are developing an ability to “speak the language” of Zionism. All of the children know Hatikvah (even if they cannot identify it by name), and several can belt out the lyrics of other nationalist Israeli songs, including *Eretz Yisrael sheli yafah v’gam porachat* (my land of Israel is beautiful and also blooming) and *Kachol v’lavan* (blue and white). A few can speak unprompted about major figures in Israeli history and society, like Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion or its current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The children weave this knowledge into their own ways of speaking and talking about Israel.

More important than the details that they use to populate their accounts is the fact that, when young American Jewish day school students craft their own narratives about Israel, their
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stories exhibit evidence of some of the central principles of historical and contemporary Zionisms. This is crucial because, as Jon Levisohn (2016) explains,

“We operate with what psychologists call ‘schemata,’ larger frameworks into which we organize information; we learn (and retain) facts only when we contextualize them in some schema, narrative or conceptual framework. That is where we ought to focus our pedagogic attention.” (p. 13).

By this measure, day school students are, from a very early age, successful at developing the building blocks for understanding Zionism. They have begun to use some of the meta-narratives of Zionist ideologies even when they are neither cognitively nor metacognitively unaware that they are doing so.

Conducting an Audit of Children’s Israel Knowledge

As the pages above have demonstrated, there are two ways of understanding day school students’ knowledge of Israel and Zionism. Using a “deficit model” grounded in a theory of cultural literacy, students’ knowledge of Zionism is measured against adult conceptions. By this view, knowledge of Zionism of elementary school students who attend day schools appears to be woefully lacking. Even as they near the end of their primary school studies, many children cannot even define Zionism at the most basic level. This deficit may be unsurprising given that even day school students at the middle and high school level often express a lack of confidence in speaking about Zionism (Pomson, Wertheimer, & HaCohen Wolf, 2014), yet it is nonetheless a troubling trend for schools whose very missions are tied to connecting students to Israel. Viewing children’s knowledge of Zionism through this lens might suggest the need for a radical overhaul of day school Israel education.
Using an “inventory model,” however, it becomes clear that as early as Kindergarten, day school students actually understand a great deal about the Jewish people’s historic and contemporary connection to the land and State of Israel. Many day school students at the elementary level also believe that Israel plays a meaningful role in their own lives, even though they do not label that connection as Zionist. Using an inventory approach to assessing students’ knowledge honors “children’s ways of knowing” (Robertson & Gerber, 2001; Wilson, 1997), recognizing that even when children are unable to use the language that adults do when speaking about Israel, they nonetheless are beginning to develop a grammar of Zionism.

It is this grammar—a basic understand of the metanarratives of Political, Cultural, Revisionist, Religious, Diaspora, and Labor Zionisms—that constitute the building blocks of students’ learning about Israel. Therefore, day schools that care about teaching Zionism ought to be assessing whether and how their students are able to speak its metanarratives in their own words: To what extent do students understand that both Jewish peoplehood and Israeli nationalism are implicated by the existence of a Jewish State? To what extent do they understand the ways that Hebrew language and literature infuse and are infused by the character of Israel? To what extent do they understand the unique opportunities and challenges of a Jewish majority state? To what extent do they view Israel as imbued with religious Jewish significance and/or Divine inspiration? To what extent do they view themselves, as Jews living outside of the State of Israel, as bound to its present and future? To what extent do they understand that Israel was not only constructed by its founders, but continues to be built by its citizens and those who care about it today?

All of these concepts are within the intellectual grasp of even the youngest day school students, and they can be built upon in increasing sophistication and nuance over time. For, as
reowned education reformer Deborah Meier (1995/2002) explains, “little kids, lo and behold, are capable of some very fancy abstractions” (p. 47). Yet no test or quiz—no matter how extensive or sophisticated—can capture how children think about these issues because, by definition, such formal assessments are adult-driven.

As an alternate approach to assessment, day schools might conduct an “Israel audit” in which adults listen carefully to the ways that children speak—and don’t speak—about Israel when they do so in self-directed conversations. This is an audit in two senses of the word: an inspection of children’s knowledge, and an auditory process that requires carefully listening to the words (and silences) of children.

Day schools wishing to conduct such an audit might ask: When in their lives do our students talk about Israel? When they do talk about Israel, what are the narratives they craft, and what Zionist metanarratives are embedded in their accounts? To what extent do these narratives and metanarratives align with the ideological commitments of our institution and its adult stakeholders? Given what our students already say, how might we build curriculum and programming to help them learn Zionist metanarratives they have not yet grasped and increase in sophistication those they already have?

The goal here is not to determine what children ought to say based on adult’s hopes or desires for them, nor what educators anticipate children will say in response to particular lessons or experiences. Rather, such an audit orients educators towards understanding what children do say when they are allowed to speak freely, and in their own words. Children’s ways of speaking then become the starting point for any curricular or programmatic tinkering or redesign.

In conducting such an audit, individual day schools are likely to realize their students already know many of the metanarratives of Zionism. At the same time, there is much about the
variegated texture of Zionism that they cannot yet articulate but could understand. For, as Elliott explains, “I know a lot about Israel, and there’s so much I don’t know!”
References


Center for Israel Education (2015). *Israel: A curriculum for grades 2-7*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Israel Education.


Day School Students’ Knowledge of Zionism—DRAFT—Do Not Circulate, Cite, or Reproduce

in North America. Gilo Family Foundation.

McGraw-Hill Education (UK).


Day School Students’ Knowledge of Zionism—DRAFT—Do Not Circulate, Cite, or Reproduce


Melbourne, Australia: Acer Press.


Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>AFFILIATION</th>
<th>PARENTS’ BIRTHPLACE(S)</th>
<th>VISITED ISRAEL</th>
<th>RELATIVES IN ISRAEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avigail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chabad</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ari</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States, Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Father, Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran, U.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States, Iran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran, U.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chabad</td>
<td>Israel, Swaziland</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Aunt, Uncle, Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States, Iran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grandmother, Aunt, Uncle, Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Israel, Canada</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lior</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Deceased Great Grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lailah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Grandparents, Uncle, Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>United States, Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Great Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>Israel, Czech Republic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Israel, Peru</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chabad</td>
<td>US, Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peretz</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>US, Israel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Israel, Argentina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tzvi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: What is Zionism?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>What is Zionism? (3rd grade answer)</th>
<th>What is Zionism? (4th grade answer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avigail</td>
<td>I don't even know what it is.</td>
<td>I'm not sure what Zionism is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ari</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>I'm not sure.</td>
<td>I don't think I've ever heard that before, so I don't really know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>Um ... I don't really know.</td>
<td>Something about like how Israel like maybe like fights and gets their rights, maybe. I don't know.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Uh...This is hard um... Maybe it could mean like ... like... it could be like a religion?</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dina</td>
<td>As a random guess, it has something to do with Israel... maybe believe in their people?*</td>
<td>I actually don't really know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott</td>
<td>I don't know what that is. They believe in God, uh one God?</td>
<td>I don't know what that is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gia</td>
<td>Studying Zion, except I don't know what Zion is.</td>
<td>I have no idea. Maybe the study of rabbis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>I don't know. I've never heard that word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayim</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>I don't know. Uh, a religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>I don't know. I think it might mean that different people from, um, the world come to Israel.</td>
<td>I don't know. Sounds to me like a religion or something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>I don't know because I've never heard of the word Zionism.</td>
<td>I've never heard of Zionism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>Zionism? Belief? In God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>I don't know that word.</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keren</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
<td>Zionism are people who want to help Israel...They fight against people who want to take over....[A Zionist] is a person who wants to help Israel be a better place.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lior</td>
<td>Zionism? I don't know what that is.</td>
<td>I don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lailah</td>
<td>Zionism? Freedom.</td>
<td>Um, maybe it's a religion? I don't know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>I have no clue.</td>
<td>No clue. Maybe a religion or something?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Day School Students’ Knowledge of Zionism—DRAFT—Do Not Circulate, Cite, or Reproduce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Zionism is like a good place to live in, not a perfect, but a good place.*</td>
<td>I don't know. Probably an important place, like somewhere that lots of people care about.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomi</td>
<td>I don’t know. Maybe it's another religion? But I'm not sure what it is.</td>
<td>Zion, the Zionists were a group of Jews who lived not in Israel, trying to go back in Israel; but it was under Palestinian rule. But eventually they had the war. Then they got Israel back.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>I have no idea.</td>
<td>I've never heard of Zionism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl</td>
<td>I have no clue.</td>
<td>I don’t really know. Like the Zionist people? We’re starting to learn about them [but…] we didn’t really get into everything yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peretz</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rina</td>
<td>I don’t know. Zionism is ... A Greek god, something?</td>
<td>Zionism, well I heard that Israel once was called Zion. And how it was a very important name and how like it was like the name that Theodor Herzl came with-came up with.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>I don't know, but Zion is a place in Utah.</td>
<td>Zion is somewhere in Israel, but Zion's also a place in Utah with that big rock. Zion National Park. A Zionist, we talked about this in class. It was a person who wants to live in Israel, who has to go for a little while but always wants to go back to Israel.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>I'm not sure.</td>
<td>Zion was another name for Israel before it was named Israel I think it had, like, seven or eight different names and Zion was one of them. I don’t know what Zionism means but I know Zion.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>I don't know what is that.</td>
<td>I guess, I don't know. Isn't it like kind of baptism, but like, Israeli baptism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tzvi</td>
<td>I don't know! I've never heard that word before.</td>
<td>The root word Zion was the name of Israel before it actually became Israel. Well, it was Palestine...There was this guy who started this Zionist thing...He made something called the Zionist group, and lots of people wanted to do that because they wanted a Jewish state, somewhere they could settle instead of having to move from place to place and stuff. So what happened was, they had to, they became Zionist and ended up creating a Jewish State in 1948.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No answer was recorded for some children who either declined to answer the specific question, were not available for the particular interview from which this data was drawn, or who were unable to complete the entire interview due to issues of focus or school scheduling constraints.*