

# WHO'S A JEWISH TEACHER?

## A Narrative Inquiry into General Studies Teaching in Jewish Day Schools

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*Contrary to conventional wisdom, a two-year study found that teachers in day schools do make a significant contribution to the Jewish education that day school students receive. In addition, teaching general studies in day schools is quite different from teaching in public or secular private schools; the professional lives of general studies teachers are shaped by the Jewish context in which they work.*

In 1998 the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education published findings from a watershed inquiry into teachers in Jewish schools. This study—the largest ever investigation of educators in North American Jewish schools—gathered data from 983 teachers in day schools, supplementary schools, and preschool programs within the Jewish communities of Atlanta, Baltimore, and Milwaukee. As an inquiry into the training, working conditions, and career patterns of so many Jewish teachers, it constitutes a significant step in a process of building the profession of Jewish education (Gamoran et al., 1998).

However, this major study chose to ignore those teachers with whom most Jewish day school students spend at least half of their classroom time: general studies teachers. The exclusion of at least half of those who teach in Jewish day schools from a study of teachers in Jewish schools is problematic. This omission resonates with two assumptions often expressed by those who construct policy for Jewish day schools and which I have often encountered both in my work as a professor of education and in my (supposedly more private) role as day school parent and board member.

These two assumptions might be stated as follows:

1. Unlike their Judaic studies colleagues, day school general studies teachers do not possess a significantly different profile from those teachers whom students might encounter in public schools. These teachers teach the same subjects they might teach in the public system, they play similar kinds of roles, and they face similar kinds of expectations.
2. General studies teachers do not constitute a significant variable in shaping the Jewish character of Jewish schools. They do not contribute substantially to the added Jewish value for which parents pay in Jewish day schools.

In this article, I question these assumptions, first by demonstrating that teaching general studies in Jewish day schools is quite different from teaching in a public school and then by showing that the teachers of these subjects do in fact regard themselves as making a significant contribution to the Jewish education that day school students receive. For these reasons the contributions of these teachers should not be excluded from deliberations about how to revitalize Jewish education.

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Evidence for these claims comes from a two-year narrative study of Jewish day school teachers. This study was launched under the inspiration of a body of work that has proliferated over the last twenty years, in which researchers attend to teachers as sources of insight about teaching by using narrative methodologies that convey the essence of teaching. A rich collection of teacher autobi-

ographies and biographies (Abbs, 1974; Bateson, 1990), life history studies (Casey, 1993; Goodson, 1992), teacher stories and narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Holly, 1989; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995), and collections of teacher lore (Schubert & Ayers, 1992) have opened new perspectives on the lives, work, and careers of teachers. Although the teacher narrative movement has only had a limited impact on research conducted in the field of Jewish education, its work has informed a small number of dissertations and recent conference papers about Jewish teachers and teaching (e.g., Dorph, 1993; Schoenberg, 1989).

In 1997, drawing on this body of work, I launched a research project into narratives of Jewish teaching at York University, and it is from this project that the data here are taken. This project has used journal writing and open-ended elaborative interviews to elicit Jewish teachers' stories, insights, and knowledge.

For two years, 15 teachers from seven Jewish day schools in Canada and England kept diaries for the duration of an academic year while meeting regularly with a research team member. During the first academic cycle the project worked only with elementary school Jewish studies teachers. As data began to emerge from the project (see, for example, Pomson, 1999a, b) colleagues and peers encouraged us to examine also the work and lives of general studies teachers in Jewish schools. They suggested that this would not only help provide comparative data with which to make better sense of the roles and relationships of Jewish studies teachers but would also give voice to a significant and generally disregarded group of educators who make an important contribution to day school education.

Therefore, at the start of the second academic cycle, the research team sought out pairs of Jewish and general studies teachers (grade partners) to take part in the study. Four pairs were found in two Canadian day schools (one Orthodox and one non-Orthodox), although subsequently two of the Jewish studies teachers withdrew. As in the first year of the project, participants received a hard-bound

journal in which they were asked to write, at least once every two weeks, about any aspect of their lives and work that they regarded as having been important for their teaching. Individual participants then met with a project team member approximately once every six weeks to elaborate on what they regarded as gaps in their narratives or to revise whatever they may have recorded.

## FINDINGS

This project has generated a rich collection of engaging and often personal texts that touch on a diversity of issues and experiences. Most of the themes raised can be characterized as generic to the life and work of teachers (Pomson, 1999c). They relate, for example, to the school as a workplace, to the problematics of pedagogy, and to the relationships that develop between teachers, their students, and their students' parents. Within this thematic mosaic that so vividly portrays what it means to be a teacher—any kind of teacher—several narrative pieces have also captured images and issues particular to Jewish education.

Contrary to the assumptions outlined earlier general studies teachers have often explicitly stated that their professional lives have been shaped by the Jewish context in which they work, and perhaps more significantly, that they see themselves as also having shaped the Jewish character of that context. In this section we therefore present an interpreted montage of selected narratives that capture these dimensions within their work and lives.

### **The Teacher's Life Shaped by a Day School Context**

If there has been one dimension of the day school experience that more than any other has influenced the general studies teachers' professional practice, it has been the positioning of their work within a dual curriculum. In the schools from which project participants came, the curriculum was structured around an equal division of teaching time between Jewish and general studies, with students' time divided between two teachers who "share" the class.

In some respects, this has produced fairly predictable consequences, with teachers wrestling to adapt—"shoehorn"—programs constructed around government guidelines into the shorter time available in day school. The journals reveal that over the course of an academic year this squeeze requires teachers to enact a series of difficult curriculum decisions about what to attempt in class time, what to demand from students in their own time, and what to sacrifice altogether.

One participating teacher, Jenny, not only captures this special intensity but also the kinds of decisions it forces teachers to make:

In public school you have a full day, and you can stretch your program. Here it's a pressure cooker. It's rush rush rush the whole day.... Every day you have to keep going, otherwise you won't finish.

After a while I just say, look, this is the group of kids I have.... I can't put any more pressure on them. If I do a story less in language arts and if we do a concept less in math and we'll do this thoroughly, that's what it will have to be. As long as all the skills are covered. The main goal is to cover skills.

Not surprisingly, as Jenny demonstrates, the shorter time available in the dual curriculum forces teachers to think critically about what they teach and how they teach. It creates an environment in which teachers must engage in a kind of epistemological thinking, as they clarify what it is both necessary and sufficient knowledge in their subject area.

Less predictably, the journals reveal that the dual curriculum also has an impact on how teachers think about themselves as teachers. It has been one of the commonplaces of research into teachers' professional lives that they work in isolation, behind closed doors, in the insulated environment of their own classrooms (Hargreaves, 1994). If anything, it is not the fact of isolation that is debated but rather its causes and the extent to which these are structural (a product of the social and physical organization of schools) or psychological (a product of teacher insecurity, obstructive-

ness, or individuality).

It is evident from the journals that the dual curriculum undermines this isolation in profound ways, making day school teaching at the elementary level significantly different from teaching in most other schools. The assault on isolation can occur in quite physical ways, for more often than not teachers share not only groups of children but also the classrooms in which they teach. Classroom space must be negotiated between individuals who may have very different ideas of what classrooms should look like or how they should operate.

Natalie conveys this well in a story about her first years in teaching:

I started my teaching career very late. I came in with all of these wonderful ideas and I walked into this classroom with my new partner (a man who had been teaching for more than 25 years) and the room was empty and the students were sitting in rows. I had just come out of cooperative learning where you want the kids to feel like it's home and you let them make it their space.

So I had to call on my principals for help. We had a meeting, and for the first few years, because he (my partner) wasn't happy with groups... we had to change the seating everyday at lunchtime. His compromise was that at the end of the day, he would take the last five minutes and they would quickly push all the desks into groups so they'd be ready for me in the morning.

If furniture and physical space are at the surface of this dispute, it is evident that there are more profound issues at its heart. As other teachers in the sample indicate, different views about how to decorate classroom walls, about what to hang from the ceiling, or where to put the teacher's desk derive from divergent views of the teacher's role in student learning.

In Jewish day schools, because of the organization of time and space, the very existence of such differences tends to create intense kinds of professional and personal dissonance. In this setting, teachers cannot simply close their classroom doors and "do things their own way." Instead, they must face both the impli-

cations of the differences between them and their colleagues and find ways of coping with them, even when (as in Natalie's case) they challenge their most basic assumptions about what constitutes good teaching.

For general studies teachers in Jewish day schools, there are few opportunities to develop the sorts of professional autonomy that many teachers crave. This is in large part a product of pressures of time and space in a day school setting. However, it is also a consequence of the way these schools are financed and governed. North American day schools are private schools, and as one participant succinctly put it, when "the parents are paying, and they want it the way they want it, that's it."

From the perspective of teachers in the sample, the fact that parents pay (so much) for their children's education means that they experience an unusual degree of scrutiny and interference. In some journals this emerges as one of the most marked characteristics of teachers' work. And yet, strikingly, for all its invasiveness this is a phenomenon that the teachers view with ambivalence, rather than antipathy or anger. Thus, they appreciate the intense interest that parents show in their children's work, but are bemused when interest became intrusion (with parents coming to argue about the grade on a child's essay or test). They recognize the parents' rights to frequent reports on their children's progress, to get value for their money when they have invested so much in their education, but they resent having to provide feedback to parents for whom the regular channels of communication are inconvenient or insufficient. They are prepared to acknowledge parents as customers who are entitled to hold teachers accountable, but are angered when these consumers "question how well [they] are doing their job" or became lobby groups—"lynch mobs to have teachers removed from the staff."

Of course, all of this does not mean that Jewish day schools are more political, stressful, or interpersonally dense than other schools (Huberman, 1993). Our point is that the governance and curricular organization of Jewish

day schools press on teachers in particular ways that prevent them from constructing the sorts of professional and personal barriers behind which they might otherwise conduct their work and cultivate a sense of self-respect. For the moment, despite moves toward greater teacher accountability and greater parental intervention in North American public education, to teach in a Jewish day school means (even for those who do not teach Jewish subject matter) to live and work in a particular professional environment, subject to special expectations and obligations.

### Choosing to Work in Day Schools

Against this background it becomes especially important to examine why general studies teachers have chosen to work in day schools. For one may wonder why, given such pressured circumstances, anyone would want to teach in these settings.

Here, participants have provided remarkably consistent accounts. All report that they began their working lives outside the Jewish community, either in public schools or industry, taking positions for between five and seven years. All left employment to have children and only returned to work to positions as day school general studies teachers after between five and ten years at home.

On one level, participants explain their move to day school teaching as based on pragmatic reasons. They could take the same vacations as their children (many of whom had started day school), they could easily coordinate carpools, and above all, because of the dual curriculum, they could comfortably work half-time. In these terms, their career choices correspond well with those made by many women teachers (Biklen, 1995; Nias & Aspinwall, 1995). Day school positions enable them to find some degree of balance between work and parenting roles.

On another level, the move to day schools seems to have made it possible for participants not only to balance the different parts of their lives but to integrate them in important ways. There is a sense in which a day school appointment has been compatible with their evolving

sense of self and, in particular, with their changing identities as mothers and workers. Natalie, for example, who worked in industry for seven years before having children and then completing a one-year teacher certification program, explains it this way: "I was offered a position in the public school at the same time that I was offered this [a day school general studies position]. And I took this. I felt comfortable. It was home and it was my lifestyle. My children were being raised and going through a day school system and I felt that this is where I wanted to be." Day school work thus not only fit well with family responsibilities but it also promised a certain authenticity.

This mix of pragmatism and principle is captured more elaborately by Janet, a grade two teacher who worked for six years in the public system before then spending six years at home with her young children. She went back to work to help "put bread on the table" when her husband—a public school teacher—had been on strike for four months. She applied to a day school rather than a public school so that there would be little chance that both she and her husband would be on the picket line at the same time. But as became apparent in her writing and conversation there have also been other motivations. As she put it in one journal entry:

Most people who attend [this school] live in the community, attend school in the community, pray in the same community, shop, etc. There is also a strong commitment between home and school. That is why I chose to teach in day school rather than in the public school.... It is always fulfilling when I can sing *Hatikvah* at the beginning of the day along with O'Canada, teach the *Chagim* integrated into the curriculum, and then have the opportunity to say Shabbat Shalom on Friday afternoon when my students leave.

For Janet, the day school promises an appealing environment in which home supports school and in which (unlike in the public system) the teacher does not have to confront many problematic economic and social reali-

ties. In this way day school teaching promises the kinds of inter-relationship between school and home that have made private education so appealing to parents in flight from public education. In more fundamental terms, though, a day school position promises something of greater personal significance. As Janet indicates, it enables her, naturally and unself-consciously, to express her Jewishness in the classroom. It has allowed her, a teacher of math, language and science, to be a Jewish teacher.

### The Teacher Shaping the Jewish Context

These motivations provide a backdrop to the ways in which participants regard themselves as shaping the Jewish character of the schools in which they work, and in particular to the manner in which they see themselves as helping students understand what it means to be Jewish.

A journal entry Natalie composed about her Grade 5 class makes explicit these concerns:

I have a favorite short story called "The Yom Kippur Lesson." I planned several classes about Yom Kippur based on this story. The lessons began with Rosh Hashanah, what is it, how do we observe it, and how it leads into Yom Kippur.... The students were terrific. There was participation, humor, joking around, thought-provoking comments.

As I guided the discussion toward the more serious tone of Yom Kippur, the class rebelled. "Why are we talking about this with you? This is Hebrew stuff! We're doing this in Hebrew! Let's do English!"

This experience prompted Natalie to write the following:

At what point did being Jewish become the sole domain of Hebrew studies? When were these children told, or how did it come to be that English means "we don't talk about anything Jewish"? I have always integrated the holidays, special stories, important historic moments into our English learning. My conversation

with students is smattered with Hebrew expressions....[Yet] they see me strictly as their leader into an English-speaking world where it is "more important to know math, language and English skills" than anything else. What happened to knowing about being Jewish and knowing English stuff too?

For Natalie, as for the other participants, it is unacceptable that Jewish day schools provide students with a bifurcated view of the world. These women have chosen to work in day schools precisely because they seek to avoid compartmentalizing the Jewish and other parts of their lives. For these reasons, they work (to greater and lesser degrees) to introduce Jewish literature, topics, and values into their programs, and it is why they react angrily when students (and colleagues) underestimate their capacity to contribute to students' Jewish lives.

To some extent, this passion is fueled by a determination to counteract a phenomenon evident in many schools where Jewish studies is taught in Hebrew to students whose primary experience of Judaism is at school rather than at home. In her classroom and through the roles she takes at school, Wanda, a middle-school teacher, seeks to subvert a troubling side-effect of the dual curriculum for students whose Jewish lives are already highly compartmentalized. She makes clear her concern that if students only ever relate to Jewish matters in Hebrew classes they will assume that these issues are only relevant during certain school hours and for Hebrew speakers or specialists. Thus, although she may not introduce much explicitly Jewish material into her class, she makes a point of "teaching with her life." In a school setting that she repeatedly characterizes as resembling an extended family, she makes connections with students and teachers (as mentor, advisor, and partner) that challenge their expectations of her roles in the school and that demonstrate that it is not only Hebrew teachers who can contribute to the students' Jewish lives.

Other teachers make the same point more proactively by introducing Jewish topics and

concerns into their programs. Janet, for example, is determined to affirm the relevance of Jewish values at all times and not just at certain periods of the day. In her words, she wants students "to see and understand the importance of *middot* (Jewish values) even before they start on any academics." For much of the year she is therefore engaged in translating Jewish interpersonal values into terms that make sense to young children and where they become an integral part of the curriculum. A lesson devoted to *derech eretz*—or in her terms to "warm-fuzzies" and "cold-freezies"—is no less important than math or language arts. Similarly, she wants students to know that, in her class, birthdays are always remembered not simply because they provide an excuse to eat treats but because "whenever there's a *simcha* we celebrate." In this way she demonstrates that all classroom events can be placed within both a Jewish frame of reference and a worldly one.

More profoundly, there is a sense that for Janet, as for others in the sample, the general studies program provides opportunities to engage with questions of great Jewish significance that may not be accessible in Hebrew classes or that may be approached more effectively from within her own subject areas. For Janet in particular, contemporary children's literature is an especially powerful medium through which to introduce students to complex and difficult Jewish matters, as well as to the more familiar aspects of their Jewish lives. Reading and writing stories provides opportunities for students in her Grade 2 class to develop understanding and cultivate sensitivity to the origins of the Jewish state, war and peace in Israel, children's lives in the Holocaust, and Jewish holidays. Her year contains a week for reading Holocaust stories for children, a "walk through Israel reading," and literature units that relate to different times of the Jewish year.

Janet's commitment to the integration of Jewish themes into her reading program is unusually intense. Nevertheless, it resonates with a perspective voiced by all of the participants in this group. As general studies teach-

ers—to be precise, as teachers committed to cultivating skills, sensibilities, and dispositions that they encourage children to bring to all aspects of life—it is only natural that they should explore Jewish matters. These are so much a part of their own lives and experiences that it would be strange and somehow false if they did not bring them into their classrooms.

### RE-IMAGINING JEWISH SCHOOL TEACHING

While it is possible that the participants in our sample are not representative of general studies teachers in Jewish schools (for example, in their passion for contributing to their students' Jewish lives), and while it is also possible that their schools are not representative in the amount of freedom teachers have been allowed for pursuing these concerns, this study makes explicit in resonant fashion a phenomenon that has largely been overlooked or devalued. For the teachers in our sample do not define themselves primarily as Jewish educators and their backgrounds are not in Jewish studies. Rather, they are teachers of math, language arts, and social studies.

Yet, they are all Jewish teachers who conceive of their own Jewish lives as rich and relevant. They have chosen to teach in Jewish schools in part for reasons of convenience but no less because these schools feel like home. In committing their lives to Jewish schools (despite curriculum and governance pressures), they embody values and commitments that they regard as worth sharing with students, both explicitly and in more subtle ways through the content of what they teach. In their view, Jewish day schools would be Jewishly impoverished without their contribution.

The contribution these teachers make to the Jewish education provided by day schools is critical. In some respects the Jewish values and experiences they provide can be more powerful, persuasive, and at times more authentic than those that students encounter in Hebrew classrooms. As the accounts of these teachers demonstrate, their classrooms are not artificial or virtual Jewish environments in which

only Hebrew is spoken or in which mainly Jewish concerns are raised. Instead, these are places where people not only talk about Nintendo, insects, and soccer, but where there is also room to argue about vital Jewish concerns, about Israel, the Jewish people, and Jewish life in general. In these classrooms, there are opportunities to have fun, study seriously, and develop relationships while explicitly acting in accord with Jewish values. Here, Judaism and Jewish things are not alternatives of esoteric or limited appeal, but are part of life itself.

Of course, in terms of social scientific research criteria, the teachers' stories told of these classrooms may lack objectivity. They have been composed with intensity and immediacy by those about whom they are told. Yet, as Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) have suggested, it is the very immediacy of teacher narratives such as these that contributes to their resonance and verisimilitude. If they seem too particular to be generalizable it is because they are rooted in real individual lives. They are stories of lives lived in the classroom. It is in this way that they enlarge our understanding of teaching and teachers' work and, in this case, of what it means to be a Jewish teacher.

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