

Intergenerational challenges in Australian Jewish school education

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the intergenerational changes that have occurred in Australian Jewish day schools and the challenges these pose for religious and Jewish education. Using a grounded theory approach according to the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987), data from three sources (interviews (296), observations (27) and documents) were analyzed, thus enabling triangulation. Findings show that there is an incongruity between what the adult community defines as the central components of Jewish and religious identity which are more particularistic, and the perspectives of Jewish youth which are more universalistic.

Intergenerational challenges in Australian Jewish school education

The aim of this research is to investigate intergenerational changes that have occurred in Australian Jewish day schools and the challenges these pose for religious education and Jewish education. Australian Jewry was largely a post-Holocaust community; until recently, the Holocaust was a major component in maintaining Jewish identity (Baker, 2006; Rutland, 2010, 308-309). For many Jewish people, the establishment and maintenance of Jewish schools in the post-war era was consciously connected with Holocaust memory: the construction of a thriving, new Jewish generation in Australia was considered compensation for the loss of so many family members in Europe (Berman, 2001, 6-8). Sixty years on, Australian Jewry is facing a turning point. The Holocaust generation is gradually passing away and school children are members of the third and even fourth generation. The belief in maintaining Jewish identity as a response to the Holocaust is no longer a *sine qua non*. The Australian Jewish community is facing a transitional, generational challenge with an increase in assimilation into the general community and a decrease in the percentage of Jewish children enrolled in Jewish day schools in both Melbourne and Sydney.

The starting point for this research is that Australian Jewry is entering a new era: one of continuous change and renewal, restructure and reconstruction, reform and transformation. The current era brings with it a breaking and blurring of all kinds of

boundaries – national, social, political, technological and in communication. The validity of religion is being questioned and this creates significant challenges for religious education, including Jewish education. This research probes what Jewish students themselves think about the meaning of religion, their Jewish identity and their Jewish education in this new era. As such, we seek to explore generational differences to help to illuminate the broader generational shifts.

The complex nature of Jewish education

For most members of the Jewish community in Australia, Jewish education is considered a form of religious education, which consists of a number of components – religious, ethnic and cultural – all of which contribute to Jewish identity. Emerging during the tribal period, the Abrahamic covenant included God’s promise of the Land of Israel to the Children of Israel. Throughout the Jewish diasporic experience, the ethnic element of Judaism was strengthened as a result of their history of persecution and expulsion and their longing to return to the Land of Israel. For some Jews in the post-Enlightenment period, the ethnic dimension of Jewish identity came to take precedence over the religious element (Segev and Ben-Moshe, 2007). From the religious perspective, the Hebrew Bible is a religious text handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai; for secular Jews it is part of their cultural and ethnic heritage. Similarly, observance of the Jewish festivals has both religious and ethnic connotations. The Jewish schools in Australia, whether Orthodox or Reform, maintain the strong link of the original Abrahamic covenant both to the religious belief in God and to the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel and the Jewish people.

Theoretical Background

Major Societal Changes

In the post-modern world, there have been radical changes in human society. This is an era of globalization, the traditional boundaries that separated ideologies and communities are being broken, creating a change in the 'sense of place'. The digital innovations – Facebook, Twitter, internet, smart boards – are transforming the education scene. With the internet and kindle, the whole notion of literacy has changed. The values that may have been context-specific and unique in particular social milieus are being challenged in the light of a global perspective. In addition, a key characteristic of fluid modernity is individuation, where each individual constructs, confirms and maintains her identity according to her choice, desires and tendencies. Twenge (2009) has demonstrated the major, generational, psychological shift is to a focus on the individual, rather than on broader social needs (399). She has named this phenomenon the "Me Generation". Within the arena of Jewish education, this is particularly problematic, since in Jewish tradition the Jewish context is community based with a key value being that Jewish community needs should take precedence over individual needs. Pluralism is another key concept in modern society, but it is a complex one with a multiplicity of meanings. It incorporates three major elements: methodological, political and cultural, which are separate but overlapping. The methodological or philosophical element refers to different points of view in contrast to monism or absolutist approaches; political refers to the individual's right to choose between different strands of thought or identification; and cultural relates to the development of multicultural theory and cultural pluralism (Conyer). Another key

process that has intensified is secularization. The theory assumed that religion would vanish with the advance of modernity. In fact, the opposite has happened. Events such as the fall of the Soviet Union, the strengthening of fundamentalist regimes in Iran, and 9/11 all show that religion is still a major actor in the twenty-first century. We have seen a growing trend of terrorism in the name of God, which utilizes modern technology to promote anti-modern agendas. This shows that multiple religious discourses have emerged with both negative and positive facets.

Multiple Religious Discourses

As mentioned above, we live in a social context in which there are multiple agendas, discourses and interests continuously interacting with each other and with existing social patterns. Multiple voices of many groups are being heard in the current era. As a result, approaches to social processes in education, which may have been appropriate in past eras are no longer relevant and new ways are being explored to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century. When considering the concept of Judaism, Jewish education and Jewish identity, educators are faced with multiple agendas and a plethora of interests, motivations, tensions and conflicts: What does it mean to be Jewish and what does it mean to be Jewish in Australia and to be engaged with Judaism and Jewish education?

Traditional Jewish religious approaches have rejected pluralism and have tended to be absolutist. This also applies to Christianity and Islam. Modernity has challenged this approach. Eisenstadt (2000) was the first sociologist to argue that modernity is not a simple coherent unity but contains many facets. "Modernity liberates individuals from the constraining bonds of tradition, generating a multiplicity of options that give rise to

choice and pluralism” (5). This multiplicity is intertwined with Bauman’s (2000) notion of fluid modernity, which implies that our life is characterized by constant change and endemic uncertainty in which we have to be flexible. Modern life is fluid as opposed to the firm and solid life of the past.

A key characteristic of fluid modernity is individuation, where each individual constructs, confirms and maintains her identity according to her choice, desires and tendencies. Twenge (2009) has demonstrated that the major, generational, psychological shift is to a focus on the individual (the “me generation”), rather than on broader social needs (399). This is particularly problematic for Jewish education since the Jewish context is traditionally community-based; a key value is that Jewish community needs should take precedence over individual needs.

Socio-cultural Theory

The key socio-cultural elements are often neglected in the religious education discourse. According to Vygotsky, learning involves three basic strategies: trial and error, shaping and scaffolding. Cristancho and Vining (2012) argued that trial and error involve a more individual process, whereas shaping and scaffolding are more communal and experiential in approach. Dewey (1939) argues that experiential learning provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the learning process. Learning through experience is ‘a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience’ (Kolb, 1984, 14). In today’s secular society, this transformational approach is particularly required in religious education.

In our research, we sought to explore to what extent young Jewish students in Australia are affected by these broader societal changes and whether Jewish religious education takes into account the socio-cultural changes with the move to pluralism and individuation.

The Australian Setting

In recent years, Australian Jewry has emerged as one of the most vibrant of Jewish communities in the world, with most of the older generation of Jews having a strong sense of Jewish identity. The community has developed a rich network of Jewish communal organizations with one of its major features being its system of Jewish day schools, which integrate secular and religious education. Rates of attendance at Jewish schools are among the highest in the world. There are 17 schools in Australia – in Melbourne (8), Sydney (6), Perth, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. The Jewish school in Adelaide recently closed because of the dwindling Jewish population there. The largest Jewish day school is Moriah College in Sydney with close to 1,800 students, and Mount Scopus College in Melbourne, which is slightly smaller. Both are nominally orthodox. Melbourne schools represent a range across the spectrum from the secular, Bundist Yiddish school, Sholem Aleichem, to the ultra-orthodox Adass Israel which only accepts students from its own, closed religious community, to King David which is progressive. In Melbourne, about 70% of Jewish children attend Jewish schools, while in Sydney around 62% of them attend Jewish schools, but this percentage is declining in both cities (Rutland, 2010, 309-310). A declared aim of Australian Jewry is that no child should be

denied a Jewish education because of affordability. Nevertheless, there are concerns that some families believe Jewish schools are beyond their financial means.

Most of the schools have two main goals: to excel in secular studies so that graduates become productive citizens in the larger society; and to construct strong Jewish religious, cultural and social identities. Success in those two goals is seen as vital for developing a healthy, ongoing Jewish communal life in a new land.

In order to assess current issues and challenges facing Australian Jewry in the twenty-first century, Monash University's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, together with Jewish Care Victoria and the Jewish Communal Appeal, New South Wales, undertook a major "Gen08 study" based on a survey questionnaire, census data and focus group interviews. The Gen08 study attracted 5,840 responses, and based on the data provided argued that "the Australian Jewish community is thriving, but like other Diaspora communities it faces significant risks to the continuity of Jewish life"(Markus, 2011, 3).

The study found that the Australian Jewish community is facing a transitional, generational challenge, particularly amongst the non-Orthodox population (Markus, 2011, 9). Markus noted that the Holocaust, Israel and its associated wars, were central experiences in the parents' and grandparents' lives. However, many members of 'Gen Y' are less engaged in Jewish issues. (Markus, 2011, 11) Their lives:

... have been defined by its opportunities and material prosperity. They belong to a generation characterised by individualism (not community orientation). Gen

Y is sceptical of authority and institutions, culturally creative, supportive of diversity, embarked on personal journeys of self-discovery (Markus, 2011, 9).

We live in a highly materialistic society. In the immediate post-war period, parents were prepared to make significant sacrifices to send their children to a Jewish day school. Today, the large home, fashionable car and expensive holidays are often seen as more important than financing private school fees for a Jewish education. This situation has been aggravated over the last decade with the rise in both housing costs in Jewish residential areas and school fees, both of which have added to the pressures of the cost-of-living (Markus, 35-39).

The Markus study also claimed that there was positive change in the quality of Jewish education (p.4). The problem is how one defines 'quality of Jewish education'. Quantitative research, such as GEN08 is important, but to understand the educational process, qualitative research is also important. Our study, based on a qualitative approach, shows that while there has been some improvement, more is needed.

Methodology

This research is an ethnographic study using grounded theory methodology, a qualitative research method that aims to investigate systematic social processes existing within human relations and actions and to conceptualize them (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). It enables us to follow patterns of interaction and behaviors that are grounded in real life events. The questions we asked were open-ended, relating to overall issues such as their

most meaningful Jewish experience, what is a good Jewish Studies program and what is a good Jewish Studies teacher. The interviews and observations also provided a detailed description of the current problems being investigated, thus enabling us to delineate the components of generational change. The study is a longitudinal one, which began in 2006 and is continuing to date.

(i) Population:

For this study we concentrated on schools in Melbourne and Sydney, where 87% of Australian Jewry lives. After visiting the 14 schools in the two cities, six were selected, based on willingness to participate in the study – three in Melbourne and three in Sydney. In Melbourne, the participating schools represent the spectrum of Jewish religious observance, from an ultra-Orthodox girls' school, to a community school, which defines itself as modern Orthodox and Zionist, to a progressive Jewish day school. In Sydney, the three schools represented a narrower spectrum with two schools situated in different geographical locations defining themselves as Modern Orthodox and Zionist and a pluralistic Jewish day school. The students in the six schools come from pluralistic backgrounds, both in terms of their home religious observance, and their wider ethnic backgrounds. A greater proportion of the girls attending the ultra-Orthodox school in Melbourne are from a strictly orthodox background. Some of the children come from secular homes, but the number from inter-marriages, with one parent not being Jewish, across the schools is smaller and more prevalent in the Reform and pluralistic day schools. The most recent Jewish migrant groups to Australia are South African, Russian and Israeli. While the latter two groups tend to have a higher proportion of children in government schools, the South Africans are more likely to send their children to a Jewish

day school, and their proportion is particularly noticeable in Sydney at the two Orthodox schools, as almost 60% of South African Jews live in Sydney (Rutland and Gariano, 2005).

(ii) Tools:

Student interviews were the major focus of this study was (N=212). These interviews were conducted as focus groups, with each group first being given a set questionnaire to be completed on an individual basis, followed by the focus group interview and discussion. Jackson has shown that much educational research is based on citations from previous research rather than from empirical evidence (2006, 388). He argues that it is more authentic and accurate to listen to the voice of the students and stresses that “those who want to enhance good teaching must themselves respect evidence enough to seek it and evaluate it” (388).

In addition to the student focus groups, extensive, in-depth interviews (N=296) were conducted in both Sydney and Melbourne with teachers (33), principals (6), other key stakeholders (12) and parents (45). Classroom observations (27) were also carried out in all six schools. While more time-consuming, the use of direct observation can provide a more accurate and thick description (Geertz, 1973) as well as being more objective because the information is ‘less subject to critiques of respondent bias (Vannest and Hagan-Burke, 2010).

(iii) Procedure

First we received ethics approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney, based on the support letters we received from all six schools. We promised full

confidentiality. The principals in each of the participating schools canvassed which teachers and students were willing to participate in the study and organised our schedule, according to the required ethics procedures.

We found that the students were enthusiastic about participating and responded to the questions posed in a serious and thoughtful manner. Their cooperation reflected a maturity of approach and a multi-layered and complex understanding. Most filled out the individual, written questionnaire very carefully. In the focus groups, they were often brutally honest and spoke openly about how they felt about their Jewish identity and also how they perceived the educational framework.

(iv) Analysis:

Using a grounded theory approach according to the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987), data from the three sources (interviews, observations and documents [official literature from the schools]) were analyzed, thus enabling triangulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The analysis consisted of five stages: (1) open coding, in which recurring topics were identified and defined (e.g., relevance, choice); (2) axial coding, involving the formulation of categories defining criteria and continuing theoretical sampling (informal education, interactive learning, relevance, stimulating, quality, fun); (3) selective coding, which consists of refining and finalizing criteria to include a series of categories (such as core curriculum, extracts of the essence of Judaism, grains of Jewish culture); (4) formulating the hierarchy and identifying core categories (analysing the most meaningful Jewish experiences in schools); and (5)

creating a category-based theoretical structure linked to the literature and proposing a theoretical model.

This qualitative methodology, with its detailed description, enabled us to elicit the relevant information and create a better understanding of the current attitudes of Jewish school children in Melbourne and Sydney, with all its tensions, dualities and implicit and explicit complexity.

Findings

Holocaust No Longer a Major Factor

In general, we found from our student data that the Holocaust is becoming a ‘non-issue’, which does not exist explicitly in the students’ discourse. When we interviewed the first or the second generation, the parent generation, the Holocaust was mentioned explicitly and was viewed by them as a core issue and an important element in their identity. With the third generation, this is no longer the case. The few comments made by our student interviewees related more to the attitude of their parents, rather than themselves. Thus, one male student from Melbourne commented:

I think parents send their children to Jewish schools because they want their children to have a Jewish education. I know a lot of parents, back just after the Holocaust, a lot grandparents, our grandparents, they couldn’t afford to send their children to Jewish schools so I think our parents want to send us to Jewish schools so that we can get the Jewish education that they never had.

Another Melbourne student (a girl) raised the problem of maintaining interest in the Holocaust, given that the survivor generation is passing away:

I'd say especially about the Holocaust because at the moment there are like still Holocaust survivors around so it makes people believe in it but in the future there are not [going to be] the Holocaust survivors and people's belief of it, like you know, they might doubt it, like firsthand evidence of it, like it is just in textbooks and people don't always believe everything they read.

Israel and Hebrew

In general, there were fewer references to Israel in the focus group discussions, although in response to their most important Jewish experience, Israel ranked second, in parallel with the various life cycle celebrations offered at the different schools as discussed below (See Figure 1). It was the informal, out of the classroom events, which had the most impact on the students with regard to Israel. When asked about learning Hebrew, many of the responses were highly critical. Some students commented on the fact that so many day school graduates could study Hebrew from kindergarten until the upper years in high school, and yet their Hebrew knowledge was very poor:

Also it is unsuccessful in that we have all been learning Hebrew now since kindergarten and if you say one sentence in Hebrew to most people in the school they will have no idea what you are saying.

The students provided various reasons as to why Hebrew teaching was not successful. Some felt that the problem was that most of the students would not use Hebrew after they

graduate, so that it had no practical use. Without proper motivation, the teaching and learning of Hebrew is not taken seriously. One of the students commented on the problem of low motivation of the students as follows:

I think that we might be having like too much Jewish learning because there is a lot of things – like not many people are going to use *Ivrit* [Hebrew] or things like that after school – and maybe it would be more successful if you had other languages or something as an optional amount of Jewish learning.

Thus, unless students planned to spend time in Israel, they did not see the study of Hebrew as being relevant to their lives.

The compulsory nature of the program was seen as a major problem by some because “when I was younger I just resented it because I never like being told what to do. Kids in Australia, they don’t like being told you have to study this.”

Other students supported the fact that Hebrew should be compulsory in Jewish day schools, and felt the real problem was the poor teaching methods:

I really think it is important because like people do, like they do want to... if they could speak Hebrew they would. Everyone wants to know another language but if it was taught well like. We have been learning Hebrew, this is our ninth year of learning Hebrew, we should really be fluent by now but we are far from it. If

it is always hard. If they used different programs I think it would be more successful. We do like the same things every year.

The problem of the repetitious nature of the Hebrew curriculum and the fact that those students who did not immediately grasp the concepts tended to give up and be turned off from learning more was stressed by a number of students. Difficulties relating to the teaching and learning of Hebrew is an ongoing story, but the current generation seem to be more forthright in their reactions.

From the comments, some schools are more successful with their Hebrew programs than other schools, but even in those schools where there were more positive responses, the success rate was seen to depend on the ability of the individual student to learn Hebrew. As one female student put it:

I reckon it is all that if you are good at Hebrew and if you are good at Hebrew you want to pursue it. If not it is just becomes a boring subject and a subject that you don't want to focus on.

From our classroom observations, we saw that most Hebrew teachers in the different schools used frontal teaching methods; there was no interactive learning or real-life language interaction, so that the use of the language lacked authenticity. The absence of a sense of a living language made the lessons 'boring', as the student commented above, and resulted in significant discipline problems in comparison to the secular lessons, which we attended.

Universalistic Perspective

There is a feeling among the older generation that community cohesion is being undermined because of the decline of personal commitment and volunteering within the Jewish community. Quoting two Jewish community leaders, Andrew Markus in his study of “Jewish Continuity” noted that young people today are unwilling to make “personal sacrifices for the [Jewish] community” (p.75). From our focus group interviews, this seems to depend on how the community was defined. Many of today’s younger generation wish to engage in universalistic and humanistic projects, such as assisting indigenous Australians or disadvantaged groups overseas, rather than specific Jewish causes. For them, it is the broader, global community that matters. Students across the schools commented that they wanted to learn a broader curriculum, including learning about other religions, and not just Jewish issues:

But like they also have to teach about other religions, not just tell you the facts that Judaism is the best like and they can’t only teach you about that; they have got to teach you about Islam and Christianity.

Some students were highly critical of the inward looking approach of their school, with one student stating: “We have learnt so much about Judaism that I actually hate it now. I am being honest...” Another commented:

We learnt about the Amalekites. Our teacher, said: ‘It’s the Jews’ job to wipe out, if we could find the Amalekites, it is our job to wipe them out.’ So I said:

‘Hypothetically if a Jew became Australia’s Prime Minister and they were able to trace down Amalekites you would say it is okay to put them into gas chambers and do exactly what Hitler did?’ He said that he would personally do it. That is not okay with me.

This is an example of an essentialist discourse, where the teacher expresses a very narrow perspective, as if he were still living in an a-historic biblical period.

Multiple Perspectives and Choice

Many students feel that Judaism is offered to them in a black and white fashion as a ready-made commodity that they have to ‘buy’. Yet, the students want to be given a larger range of perspectives, rather than an essentialist one. They want a Jewish Studies program which offers them choice. One student defined successful Jewish education as follows:

It is a school where there is a lot of emphasis on not forcing their beliefs onto the students but rather giving them a path to go down and letting their opinions really come to the fore...

The importance of students being presented with different points of view and being able to choose was emphasised by students in both Melbourne and Sydney. As one female student put it:

Obviously each Jewish school has a stand and you know it is important that you not only teach, it would be a problem if you only teach the students your one view of Judaism, or God, or something like that. You need to kind of let the students decide for themselves and teach them, you know get the teachers ... to speak objectively, let them express both sides and the different views and then the students develop their own opinion. Because at lot of the times we are only taught one side and that could be a problem.

The students continually stressed the issue of only being taught the positive side of Judaism, without being presented with more pluralistic perspectives, and this was seen as a major problem with Jewish education and their teachers' approach.

Core Elements and the Need for Improvement

The words that kept coming up again and again in both the questionnaires and the focus group interviews were: “fun”, “interactive”, “passionate teachers”, “ability to inspire”, “relevance”, and “choice”. The students indicated that, on the whole, these elements were missing from their Jewish Studies classes, so that the students from all the schools stressed the need for improvement, although in some cases students noted that there had been some changes. For instance:

“... the language and the subject need to be improved on, the way that they teach needs to be more exciting to the students”

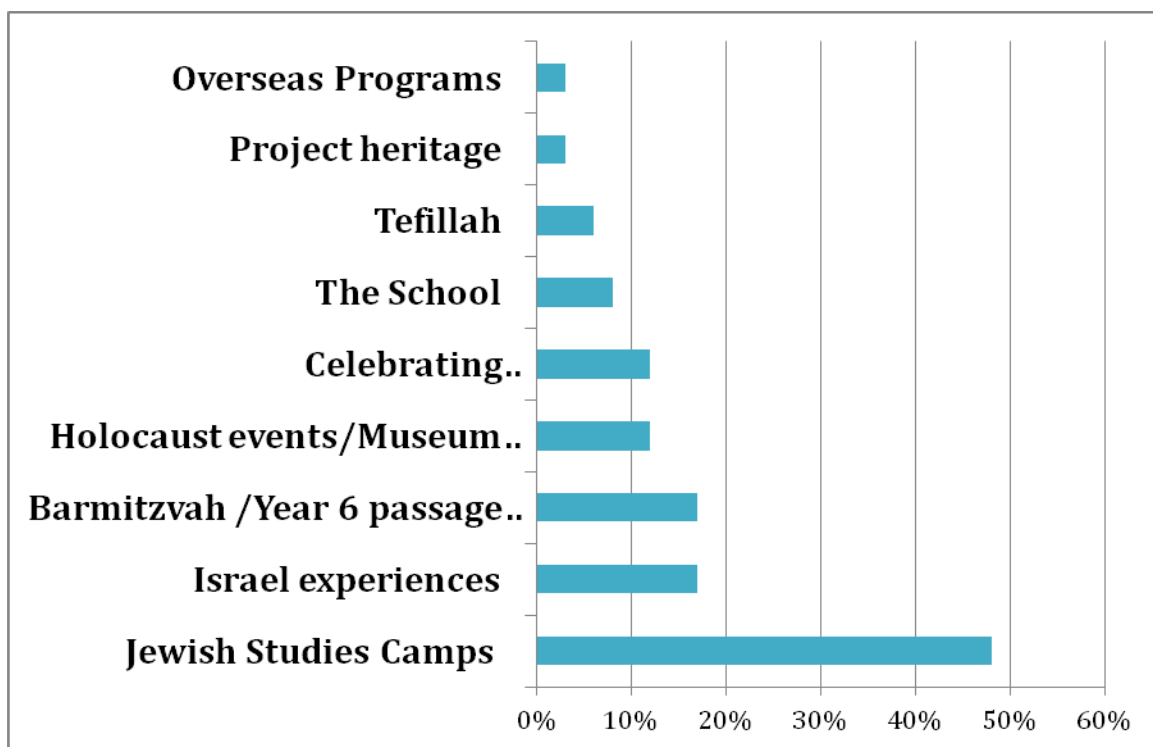
“...I think it is a successful Jewish school but it could improve...”

“... I think that it is not 100% successful now but I think that it is well on its way”

My most meaningful Jewish experience

In addition to the focus group discussions, the students from each of the schools completed an individual questionnaire, which included the question of what they considered to be their most meaningful Jewish experience. Figure 1 summarises their responses.

Figure 1: Students' most meaningful Jewish experience



The largest number of students listed 'Jewish studies camps'; that is, informal education, as their most powerful Jewish experience at school. Many of the students commented on the fact that the camps gave them an opportunity to question and explore their religious beliefs, to be 'totally immersed in Judaism', creating 'a deeper connection to Israel and

their Jewish identity’ so that they could ‘grow spiritually and [draw] closer to God’. One Sydney student’s written comment summed up these different responses:

These camps are special as they give us a chance to evaluate ourselves, our beliefs and our practices. It also renews our Jewish identity and helps build our characters and reinforces values.

In terms of Israel, the most common experience to be mentioned was the celebration of Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), which ‘created the feeling of community and family’, although some students mentioned ‘Yom Ha’Zickaron (Israel’s Memorial Day) as being a very powerful experience. Interestingly, Israel ranked together with Jewish life cycle events, such as bar mitzvah (Jewish coming of age ritual for boys), Bible or Prayer Book presentations, as well as Year 6 passage programs, where in one particular school, this was a common response. The students who listed these events commented that they were ‘awesome’, ‘deep and powerful’, creating a ‘feeling of belonging’ and ‘marking a turning point in my life’. Holocaust experiences were ranked third, particularly a visit to a Holocaust Museum, on a par with the Jewish experiences of celebrating *Hagim* (festivals), Shabbat and *Mitzvot* (keeping commandments), such as charity activities. The festivals mentioned most were Purim, when it is a tradition to dress up, and so seen as ‘fun’, and Passover. One student commended that celebrations of the festivals meant that ‘all students got involved and it’s quite meaningful’. Some students mentioned elements relating to the teachers or their whole school experience. *Tefillah* (prayer) was mentioned, but only by a few students, as was a ‘roots’ program called

‘Project Heritage’, which is carried out in all the Sydney schools. Thus, the ethnic component of Jewish identity – Israel – ranked equally with the religious components of either life cycle (Years 7/8) or bible/prayer book presentations (Year 1); and the same applied to the Holocaust ranking equally with festival celebrations, which form a significant part of the Jewish Studies programs in the schools. However, the latter two only attracted 12% of student responses, compared with 18% for Israel and life cycle events and 48% for Jewish camps.

Discussion

A significant change in the way that the younger generation perceives society and culture was found in stark contrast to the older leaders of the Jewish community, whose aspirations have not changed. Jewish children in Australia are situated within two different social reference groups: the Jewish community and the broader Australian community. Thus, the younger generation is faced with contested values and memories. The immigrant generation that came after the war was a minority, and invested great effort to maintain their cultural and religious heritage, and opposed cultural assimilation. They maintained a particularist approach (Rutland, 2010; Markus, 2011), while, as our findings demonstrate, the younger generation is more universalistic and wishes to volunteer for humanistic causes rather than internal Jewish causes. Thus, the third generation is more influenced by the broader society and its members see themselves as part of the majority. Israel, Jewish religious symbols and the Holocaust are no longer so pervasive for many in the current generation. There is an incongruity between what the

adult community defines as the central components for Jewish identity, and the perspectives of the Jewish youth.

There is a communication gap between the generations. Everything in Australian society has changed except for the religious curricula and the pedagogic strategies. Jewish Studies teachers are still using old fashioned, essentialist types of identity definitions rather than building on constructivist, pluralistic, multicultural types, which are more relevant to the needs of twenty-first century. Thus, there is a challenge to the Jewish schools to make their religious education programs more meaningful to the new generation. Intergenerational transmission involves effective teaching and learning strategies.

Essentialist vs. Constructivist

Our findings showed that the most significant experience for our interviewees were the Jewish Studies camps, which fostered a broad and explorative approach to Judaism and Jewish identity. Sagi (2002) distinguishes between essentialist and constructivist definitions of identity. The essentialist definition assumes that the “self” has political/religious/cultural characteristics, which are independent of the historical, cultural and social contexts within which it is situated. The constructivist approach assumes that personal identity is constructed and produced within the historical, cultural and social contexts. Whereas an essentialist approach emphasizes the holistic, harmonious, static aspect of identity, the constructivist approach emphasizes the fragmentary, dialectic and constructive nature of identity. Counterpoint, which is an educational camp that encourages participation and exploration, provides an open-ended, constructivist

approach to Jewish socialization. The students encounter experiential, interactive pedagogic strategies, which facilitate relevance and a better understanding of their Jewish identity. Research has shown that the current generation responds better to interactive learning (Twenge, 2009, 398).

Types of Classroom Discourse

Sfard distinguished between two kinds of discourses – acquisition (learning knowledge) and participation (being part of the broader Jewish discourse) (Sfard, 1997, 2005). Our observation is that the schools focus on acquisition rather than participation. In the focus group discussions, many students from all the schools criticised frontal teaching methods. They felt that the teachers were offering them a fixed, one-dimensional “commodity” that they were forced to acquire, rather than knowledge engagement. Therefore, it is not surprising that they were so positive about Counterpoint. Traditional Jewish education was experiential, as seen in the Passover service (the Seder), but this approach has been lost in the Jewish school classroom, which is more abstract and factual and where teachers are still using out-dated education methods.

On one hand, the students wanted a more universalistic approach to their Jewish Studies learning; yet they also wanted the instruction to be more relevant to their own lives. There was a tension between what they enunciated in wanting an ‘objective approach’, but at the same time desiring that both their classroom learning and their outside, informal activities would relate to the subjective rather than the objective perspective, in order to make the learning more meaningful (Terry Lovat, 2005).

In her article about ‘Teaching Generation Me’, Twenge (2009) has shown that ‘most young people no longer respond to appeals to duty; instead, they want to know exactly why they are doing something and want to feel that they are having a personal impact’ (404). This was confirmed in our findings, where the students desire to know that the instruction is relevant for their personal survival and will help them to be a competent adult in their cultural context. This was seen most clearly with many students’ negativity to the study of Hebrew, which they did not see as relevant to their current and future existentiality. Whereas previous generations saw Hebrew study (their ethnic language) as an imperative and an important constituent of the persistence of their social group, this is no longer the case.

We can see three main shifts. The first is a cognitive shift, which is a constructivist perspective that shifts attention from discussing what Jewish education is, to a discussion about how we define and thus construct and conceptualize Jewish education. The second is the issue of relevance: Jewish education is the emergence of global and local relevancy spaces. The third is subjectivation: students act from a subjective standpoint so that there is a need to investigate current practices and materials to constitute new forms of subjectivation.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Our study identified a number of relevant factors associated with religious transmission for the current generation. Religious education should be constructivist, with students gradually constructing their identity. Such instruction should be reflective, not instrumental (Gross, 2010). Following Alexander (2001), Jewish education should be

situated 'between the subjectivism and relativism of the left and the dogmatism and fundamentalism of the right' (xiii). There is a dialectic between a compulsory, core curriculum and a flexible, open-ended, vibrant approach (Weisse, 2011).

Informal religious education is the most meaningful approach, together with experiential and interactive learning for the transmission of religious knowledge and identity. This can occur through a variety of channels, including formal classroom instruction, camps, and social learning. Students like to be directly involved with their learning, and when direct instruction is required, there are many modern technologies which teachers can employ, such as graphics, short video clips and the smart board (Twenge, 2009, 403). However, according to the students' testimony, their teachers do not use these strategies. Incentives are required for these teachers to improve their skills, so that they learn to use modern teaching techniques and make the subject matter more relevant. In addition, more investment into producing local Australian quality teachers is needed. There is also an increasing dichotomy between those concerned with maintaining Jewish particularism (uniqueness or fundamentalism) and those whose approach is more secular and universalistic.

It is possible that other religious groups face the same or similar challenges. Longitudinal and diachronic observations into changes in transmission of cultural and religious heritages are required to develop better strategies (Greenfield, Maynard and Childs, 2000 (Ziebertz, 2003)).

Our findings relate to the sustainability of religious education as part of the rich tapestry of multi-cultural Australia. Our main conclusion is that developing a good balance between schooling, multiculturalism and religious commitment is a key

challenge for the twenty-first century, of concern for Jewish continuity and Australian public policy.

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