Learning to read Hebrew in a Jewish community school: Learners' experiences and perceptions

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study conducted in a large Reform Jewish Sunday school in the UK. It focuses on learners' experiences and perceptions of learning to read Hebrew in the school as well as in the other sites in which they were learning to read. These experiences and perceptions are neglected in other research accounts. The findings reveal important insights into learners' experiences, enjoyments, frustrations and expectations regarding both the purposes and the processes of learning to read in Hebrew and raise issues about learning and teaching. The findings contribute to wider debates about literacy and learning to read and address questions raised in the literature concerning what children do with, and make of, the language learning they experience in their community school settings.

Key words

Supplementary schools; Hebrew; literacy; learners

Introduction

Many children and young people around the world attend a community school in addition to their mainstream school in order to learn to read in either their heritage language or the language of their religion. These schools are usually held in the evening or at weekends and are variously referred to as supplementary, complementary or community schools. In recent years research has appeared that has considered either the history and scale of provision and the pedagogies, purposes and functions of these schools (eg Khan & Kabir, 1999; Hall et al., 2002; Li Wei, 2006; Mau, 2007; Strand, 2007; Walters, 2011; Rosowsky, 2013a*)* or the meta-cognitive benefits of learning to read in more than one language and the important role of community schools in this as well as in cultural and linguistic identity formation (eg Robertson, 2002; Arthur, 2003; Creese & Martin, 2006; Wu, 2006; Rosowsky, 2008; Gregory et al. 2013a). Some of this work in the US and the UK has focused on children learning to read the religious texts at the heart of their faith in community school settings (eg Rosowsky, 2008, 2013a; Miller, 2010; Schachter, 2010; Gregory et al, 2013a, 2013b). Whilst the insights and understandings produced have been valuable, this work has not focused in any depth on children's experiences of learning to read in another language and script in their community school. There are few accounts that place learners' reported experiences as central to understandings of learning to read, particularly when learners are learning to read in more than one language and script across different sites of learning at the same time.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study conducted in a large, very popular Jewish Sunday school, attached to a Reform Synagogue, in the UK. The experiences of a small group of learners who were learning to read in Hebrew in their Sunday school class and in other languages and scripts, including English, in their mainstream school settings were explored. The research was conducted in order to contribute to research that has considered children's literacy learning in community schools and other sites of learning and to focus more deeply on learning to read a liturgical literacy: that is on learning to read a sacred text (Rosowsky, 2008; 2013a). This is a neglected area of research.

Through researching learners' perspectives and experiences a number of issues are raised about learning and teaching and about what constitutes effective learning and teaching in faith school contexts where liturgical literacy is the dominant literacy. The findings reveal important insights into learners' experiences, enjoyments, frustrations and expectations regarding both the purposes and the processes of learning to read in Hebrew as well as tensions around the learning and teaching of reading. The research contributes to wider debates about literacy learning and addresses questions raised in the literature concerning what children do with their learning and knowledge about reading that come from the different sites and domains they learn in (eg Robertson, 2002; Gregory et al. 2004; Gregory et al. 2013a) and what children make of the learning they experience in their community school settings (Schachter, 2010).

Learning to read in faith settings

There has been a recent turn to researching faith settings by those who have been interested in children's literacy learning in community schools and across sites of learning. A recent study conducted in the UK investigated how children between the ages of four and twelve learned through faith activities in four different faith communities in London (Polish Catholic; Ghanaian Pentecostal; Tamil Hindu and Bangladeshi Muslim) with a particular focus on how children became literate through these faith activities (Gregory et al., 2013a). The researchers found that the activities supported the development of children's biliteracy and bilingualism and that they developed a vast array of language and literacy skills (Gregory et al, 2013a). They also identified how learning in faith settings was an important aspect of coming to belong to a particular faith community (Gregory et al., 2013a). In addition to acquiring language and literacy skills, the children also developed historical and cultural knowledge as well as creative and social skills. This, the researchers claim, built children's self confidence and contributed to their learning in their mainstream schools (Gregory and Kenner, 2013: 13). Making use of the concept of 'syncretism' the researchers argued that learning in faith settings allowed the children to bring together and juxtapose different languages and literacies, learning styles and resources to 'create unique personal narratives' and to engage in creative and transformative processes in which they combined and made sense of their faith and their everyday experiences (Gregory et al, 2013d). Learners in the study drew on different cultures, traditions and histories, their knowledge of learning in other settings and other experiences to 'actively combine, create and recreate different narratives,

using different languages and different cultural traditions' in their learning (Gregory et al., 2013d: 2).

While Gregory et al. present young people as blending and weaving together the languages and literacies they meet in their different places of learning, other research has focused more on the tensions and discontinuities that exist between different sites of learning and how these have an impact on learning. Walters (2004; 2011) found that the ways in which learners were taught to read in their Mosque School had a profound effect on their orientation to reading in their mainstream classroom. In their Mosque School the children were expected to learn to decode Arabic script, master letter-sound correspondence and recite out loud the text in front of them. When learners took this orientation to reading into their mainstream classrooms they failed to orientate themselves to read for meaning or to even to appreciate that this was an expectation of their mainstream classrooms. This had consequences for these learners: their excellent reading out loud to their teachers made invisible the fact that they were not reading for meaning. As a result support was not provided and their subsequent struggles with reading school texts and completing school work were seen as indications of bad behaviour and a lack of motivation. They became identified as 'lazy' and 'naughty' or 'lacking in confidence' in ways that affected their learning and achievement in school.

Rosowsky's research in a mainstream secondary school, in which he compared the reading performances of Muslim students with those of their monolingual, non-Muslim peers, revealed a similar picture regarding this transfer of strategies and expectations of reading made by learners between their Mosque School class and their mainstream school (Rosowsky, 2005). His analysis of learners' reading test results showed that the Muslim pupils were very good at decoding but that comprehension was largely absent from their reading (Rosowsky, 2005: 34) whilst the monolingual, non-Muslim learners were able to make more use of syntactic and semantic cues and were more orientated towards meaning making when reading. Children in the Mosque School were 'acquiring' the sacred text(s) of their faith and this positioned the act of reading (and readers) in these settings as one of imitating, decoding, retaining and reciting. It is through imitation and repetition that language, and the text(s), become 'sedimented' (Rosowsky, 2013a: 309) and thus part of the reader. As Rosowsky eloquently argues, the act of meaning making in these **readings** occurs in the symbolic function of the performance rather in the individual act of making meaning from the text (Rosowsky, 2013b: 76).

What becomes clear from both Walters' and Rosowsky's research is that 'what counts as reading' varies from setting to setting as does the purpose of learning to read, the nature of the text and one's relationship to it. Wu (2006: 62) has argued that in their classrooms language learners are learning more than linguistic and cultural content – they are also learning about the culture of learning, a concept taken from Cortazzi and Jin (1996: cited in Wu, 2006: 65). Different sites of learning have different expectations of learners. Robertson makes use of Smith's concept of the 'reading club' to draw attention to the fact that children who are learning to read in both their mainstream classroom and in their community school are learning how to belong to different 'reading clubs' and that 'learners require socio-

cultural knowledge which enables them to join the 'club', learn its explicit and implicit rules and mediate its values' (Robertson, 2002: 122).

If we consider learners' experiences in terms of 'joining the reading club' in their various sites of learning then Gregory et al.'s research above presents this 'joining' as easily and successfully accomplished and beneficial with the child as the active agent blending the various ways of reading and being into a personal 'narrative'. Walters' (2011) and Rosowsky's (2005; 2013a) research shows that sometimes this 'joining' is not so easily accomplished and how different contexts construct what counts as, and the purposes of, reading differently. All focus, however, on what happens as children learn to read in different sites and domains of learning and to read religious and non-religious texts at the same time. While Gregory et al. make use of a syncretic lens and see the various sites and orientations 'blended' into a coherent narrative by the learner, Wu perceives learning sites as negotiated, dynamic and interconnected through the experiences of the adults who teach in them.

Recent research in the US and UK has looked at learning Hebrew in Jewish supplementary schools and identifies similar issues as those discussed above and introduces questions about appropriate pedagogy. Schachter (2010) directs attention to the way in which reading in Jewish supplementary schools in the US is about decoding without meaning making and how what constitutes literacy varies between mainstream and community settings. In doing so she notes the importance of the experiences and orientation to reading that learners bring with them to their Hebrew classes, how these change over time and the important need to investigate learners' experiences as they cross between different sites of learning. Schachter questions how contemporary learners experience their learning of Hebrew in Jewish supplementary school and draws attention to the fact that, despite the time spent, few learners can decode untaught texts with any fluency (Schachter 2010: 77 - 79).

A review of Jewish supplementary schooling in Britain also found that the standard of Hebrew reading was poor and the possibility of learning much Hebrew was low (Miller, 2010: 102). Miller also noted that there is a concern amongst parents and teachers regarding 'the extent to which Jewish supplementary education should mirror formal school settings' (Miller, 2010: 101) and the best way to teach Hebrew:

> The most controversial area of teaching is, without doubt, Hebrew: should it be taught in an instrumental way, to enable the child to chant their Bar/Bat Mitzvah portion or to be able to read their prayer? Should Hebrew be taught with understanding so that the child has a working use of the language through the translation of vocabulary and use of grammar? (Miller, 2010: 102)

Recent initiatives in Jewish community schools in the UK, just as in the US (eg Schachter, 2010 above), have been about encouraging innovation and creativity and a move towards teaching methods found in children's mainstream schools.

Research on learning to read in faith settings has thus revealed a number of issues and claims. One the one hand we have a perspective that sees learners as blending the ways of learning to read that they encounter in their different sites of learning, as well as, through this process, developing their languages and literacies to a high level (eg Gregory et al, 2013a). On the other we have a perspective that whilst acknowledging the skills that learners acquire draws attention to tensions and discontinuities between different sites of learning and how these can influence learners and their successful accomplishment of reading (eg Rosowsky, 2005, 2012; Walters, 2011). In these accounts learners are not necessarily found to be developing their languages and literacies in their community schools to a high level (Schachter, 2010 ; Miller, 2010). The question of the most appropriate pedagogy for teaching learners to read a liturgical text has also been raised.

What is absent from all of this research is the perspective of the learners themselves. Only one account of research (Sewell, 1996) has reported on what learners had to say about learning in a faith school setting. The boys spoken to, all attending a Mosque School in London, reported that they found much of their learning boring and irrelevant.
The absence of learner perspective in the research discussed above seems a strange omission considering the claims that are made about learners' experiences and what they gain. The data reported on here arises from a need to understand more about what children themselves have to say about their experiences of learning and reading in the various settings in which they are learning.

Methodology

In order to explore learners' perspectives of learning to read a liturgical script in a faith school and thus learning to read in more than one language, in more than one script in more than one site of learning at the same time, interviews were conducted in a large, popular Reform Jewish Sunday school in the UK. The school met every Sunday morning from 10am to 1pm and had classes for children from the age of four to eighteen. Approximately 165 children attended the school in 2013. The school was staffed by a Head Teacher and thirty-five teachers. The families were predominantly affluent, upper middle class and globally mobile with about a third coming from the US. Many parents and children travelled some distance to attend the school and Synagogue. The Head Teacher commented that 'our children are generally very wealthy, very hot-housed' and that most of the children attended private schools or International Schools for their mainstream education. Whilst the school provided an education from the age of four, some parents sent their children only for Years 7 and 8: the years in which learners prepare to take their Bar or Bat Mitzvah (BM). The Bar Mitzvah (boys) or Bat Mitzvah (girls) is a ceremony that in the Reform movement both boys and girls pass through close to their thirteenth birthday. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah symbolises the transition from Jewish childhood to Jewish adulthood and involves, in the Reform Synagogue studied, the young person taking part in the Saturday Shabbat or Sabbath service by reading the Amidah (the Standing Prayer) and the section of the Torah, the holy book, that they have been allocated. The reading of both the Amida and their section of the Torah takes the form of leining (a form of singing). The section of the Torah that a young person is set is dependent on the month in which they are born and so is specific to the young person. The

reading, or leining of the Torah portion is followed in this Synagogue by the mother of the young person reading, in English, a passage from the 'Haftarah' (a collection of writings from the Prophets) and then by the young person presenting a personal reflection on the context of their allotted portion of the Torah.

Over the course of a year (February 2013 – 2014) observations of lessons, assemblies and break times were regularly made by the researcher and recorded as field notes. These observations provided a context for the interviews and subsequent insights into the practices and pedagogy of the school.

Interviews were conducted with learners (n= 6); teachers, including the Head Teacher (n= 6) and parents of children attending the school (n= 6). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for approximately half an hour. They were all one-to-one interviews conducted by the same researcher with the exception of one of the learner interviews where two sisters, Julia and Naomi, opted to be interviewed together. Children aged between five and thirteen years of age were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and those that came forward were all interviewed. They represent a range of ages and classes in the school although there is a cluster around the ages of ten to thirteen, suggesting that learners at these stages in their learning were keen to share their experiences of learning to read. Each interview was conducted as a conversation between the researcher and the learner(s) making use of a set of prompts devised in advance by the researcher:

Interview Prompts: Interviews with learners
How long have you been coming to this school?
Why do you come to this school?
What are your experiences of learning to read here?
How does this compare to learning to read in your mainstream school?
Do you have an opportunity to use or to hear Hebrew outside this school?

There was also the opportunity for the learners to share anything they wanted to say that had not entered the conversation but that they wanted to say before the interview finished. The use of prompts allowed for a 'flexibility of response' (Robson 2011: 279) from the learners and for the researcher to follow the flow of the conversation and allow for the ways in which the learners wished to structure their accounts of their experiences and perspectives. This was a qualitative study and was interested in understanding those interviewed as 'conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them' (Robson 2011: 17). There is a recognition that what is said in an interview situation is never a straight forward 'truth', but an account constructed within the context of the interview and between the interviewer and interviewee (Walters 2012: 112-113). What has been analysed and what is discussed in this paper are the accounts that the learners shared with the researcher of their experiences and perspectives regarding learning to read in their different sites of learning. Interviews were all recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed by the researcher and then analysed using QSR NVivo 10 software (for qualitative data analysis).

All participants in the research were briefed about the research and asked to give their voluntary informed consent before any data was collected. All participants were informed that what they said would be confidential and not reported to peers, parents or teachers, including the Head Teacher or the management of the school. Parental permission for each interview with a learner was also obtained. Teacher interviews were conducted before or after school. Interviews with parents and with learners were conducted during the school day or after school depending on availability. Findings that arise from the interviews with parents and teachers are to be reported on elsewhere.

The learners and their experiences of learning to read in a faith setting

Name ***(all pseudonyms)***	*Age and gender*	*Nationality*	*Parents*	*Time attending school*	***Languages spoken or being learned***
David	13 year old boy	British	British father/ French mother (mother Jewish, father not Jewish)	9 years	**English; French (spoken)**
Nicola	12 year old girl	British	British (both Jewish)	9 years	**English (spoken)**
Julia	12 year old girl	Russian	Russian father/ American mother (both Jewish)	7 years	**English; Russian (spoken) French (learning)**
Hugh	11 year old boy	British	British (both Jewish)	7 years	**English (spoken); French; Latin (learning)**
Stephen	10 year old boy	British	British (mother Jewish, father not Jewish)	4 years	**English (spoken)**
Naomi	5.5 year old girl	Russian	Russian father/ American mother (both Jewish)	1 year	**English; Russian (spoken) French; Spanish (learning)**

The learners interviewed were unequivocal in stating that they were happy to attend the school every Sunday morning. David explained that he was very happy to attend the school because his mother wished him to understand what it meant to be Jewish and that as a family they were all keen not to lose this. Similarly, Stephen said it was important to attend as 'you might as well learn about yourself'. Hugh explained that he came to the school because he wanted to learn about his background and culture and that it was very important to do this.

He stated that the Jewish religion was important to him because it gave him a set of rules or ethics to live by and this was important to have. He also mentioned that there were only two Jews in his mainstream school while 'more than a hundred' Jews came to the Sunday school. He felt that this gave him the opportunity to discuss things about Judaism that concerned him that he could not discuss in his mainstream school. Julia and Naomi said that the opportunity to learn another language was what they liked about coming to the school every week. Julia spoke about finding it interesting to learn another language, one that 'not many people know and also that you can use when you go to other places' thus touching on the sense of connection and community attained through attending the school and learning Hebrew. She spoke about how she enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends. Nicola also reported that she liked coming to the school because 'I've got friends here, and I like seeing them'. Julia added that she felt an obligation to come to the school because she would have her BM soon. Most importantly, however, she felt that as a Jew she had an obligation to come to 'a sanctuary' (the Synagogue and school) and engage with other Jewish people. A final reason that emerged was that as a Russian Julia's father had been unable to attend a community faith school to learn Hebrew as a boy, 'My dad never got to go to this kind of place' and so this made attending the school an important act and a privilege for Julia.

What is of interest in the learners' responses is the focus on culture, language, identity and belonging rather than on faith, belief and religious practice. In their responses there is a focus on the importance of learning about community history and coming to, or retaining, a sense of belonging to a community and what it means to be Jewish. David talks about 'not losing' this whilst Stephen and Hugh speak of how attendance at the school allows them to learn about themselves, their background as Jews. The importance of community and Jewish identity pervade the answers the learners give: Hugh speaks about the importance of the connection and community with other Jewish children that attendance at the school offers whilst Julia, Naomi and Nicola speak about making friends and Julia about learning a language that offers connection to other Jewish people in other places. Julia touches on how attending the school offers her the opportunity to enter a community and presents the idea of the community as a 'sanctuary' (one denied her father). Only Hugh mentions 'the Jewish religion' and how attendance at the school is important to him because it offers him a set of rules and ethics to live by. None of the learners explicitly mentioned learning about Jewish rituals, prayers and other aspects of religious practice in their answers nor identify these as an important to their learning about and belonging to the Jewish community. The learners' focus on community, history and identity is in line with the way in which the school is presented in the school prospectus as underpinned by 'a desire to impart the content of (Jewish) tradition' and to enable the building of positive, robust Jewish identities (Prospectus 2014-15).

In talking about their learning to read Hebrew in the school and comparing this with learning to read in other languages, and in other sites, the learners were articulate and insightful. All the learners reported that the way they were taught to read, in the school, before they reached the BM years of study (Years 7 and 8), was the same as they way they were taught to read in English in their primary schools. Hugh and David also talked about how the methods were

also the same as the way they were taught to read in Latin, Spanish and French in their mainstream schools. The learners described how they were taught to read Hebrew: first learning letter names, vowels and letter-sound correspondencies followed by putting letters and vowels together to make sounds, starting to read words and then sentences and then short texts. This was accomplished through guided reading with the teacher and the use of collaborative, small group activities. It was clear from the learners' accounts that they experienced the same approach to teaching reading in the various setting where they learned to read. This is the same approach as that identified by Rosowsky in the Qur'anic classes he observed (2005; 2012).

The learners, however, were able to identify key differences in their experiences of learning to read in Hebrew despite the approach and methods being the same across sites. All the learners drew attention to the fact that they could not learn to read in Hebrew in the same way that they learnt to read in English because they did not already speak Hebrew before learning to read it. They all reported that it was much easier to learn to read in English in their mainstream schools because they were already familiar with spoken English.

> It's a lot easier (to learn to read) at Primary School...I'm always hearing people around me talking in English. I'm always picking up words here and there, but I've never, ever heard someone talk Hebrew, except for in here, even then it's not that often. So it's much harder here. (Hugh)

> When I learnt to read in English at my (mainstream) school we already knew how to speak it... so it was slightly different. They would pick out a word, and it was like 'apple': the 'a' is here and that's the word 'apple'. (Stephen)

Synthetic phonics, the approach adopted in the school, is an approach to teaching reading that relies on learners knowing the sounds and basic vocabulary of a language in advance of learning the letters that represent the sounds: it is premised on learners already speaking the language that they are learning to read in. In their learning to read in their Sunday School class, the learners did not have this knowledge of sounds and vocabulary in advance of learning to read in Hebrew. They needed to learn and remember the sounds, then learn the way to represent those sounds (ie learn a new script) and learn the meaning of the words the letters and vowels make when put together to make a word.

The learners revealed that their familiarity with the language they were learning to read in was helpful in learning to read. Nicola felt it was much easier to learn to read in English 'because we just speak it in everyday life'. Hugh, who was learning four different languages at the same time, revealed that he was familiar with the other languages he was learning and corrected the interviewer when she commented that surely he couldn't hear Latin and French being used around him in his daily life:

> Latin - I do hear parts of it quite often, and the same with French, because I go to Switzerland a lot, because my dad has a house there ... and they talk German and they talk French there which descends from Latin... and when I go to Italy, I'm hearing

> another descendant from Latin...So although I don't hear Latin itself, I hear a lot of descendants from Latin.... And the same sort of thing with French. I just hear French in Switzerland (Hugh).

However, he didn't hear Hebrew being used anywhere except when he was in the Synagogue. All the children reported that they did not speak Hebrew anywhere and only heard it when they attended the Synagogue.

Luke (2003: 138) has argued that people do not retain a language or literacy unless they have 'powerful, functional domains for everyday practical language use' and the learners seem very aware of this themselves – not only was it harder to learn to read Hebrew but it was also harder to retain what they learned. So while there was some consistency early on, across sites, in how they were taught to read in their different languages, there was already, in the early stages, a need to learn through 'rote learning' and learning the meaning only of key words in their Sunday school. Whilst the school attempted to teach the Hebrew that the children could use in their Jewish rituals in the home and community the children did not refer to this use of Hebrew in any of their replies. As the children progressed through the school and neared their BM (in Years 7 and 8) their experience was certainly one of learning through decoding and memorisation.

> Here it is more like rote learning, like learning it again and again and repeating it so it sticks in your head (Nicola).

> I think before it was more about just building up your ability to identify words, identify letters, be able to, you know, tell which sound is which letter and now it's more about kind of reading, memorising prayers, because my Bat Mitzvah's in April (Julia)

If literacy is acquired and developed through its regular use in social networks and through the 'conversations that can be joined' (Norton & Toohey, 2001) then these learners had little, if any, access to such conversations and networks. Neither could the Hebrew they were learning be considered to be 'conversational': a more appropriate way of thinking of what they were being asked to learn was of Hebrew as a song or as verse speaking.

In the shift towards decoding and memorising there was a divergence from the learners' experiences of learning their other languages in the mainstream. Whilst their modern languages retained a focus on communication and meaning making, Hebrew retained a focus on learning sounds and decoding as well as on repetition and not on meaning or communicating conversationally with others. The practice of liturgical reading became meaningful as a symbolic act of belonging and being a Jew (Rosowsky, 2013b: 76).

This focus on decoding, memorisation and recitation led to feelings of great frustration for one of the learners:

> There's something very wrong with how we learn here... I can read Hebrew ... but I have no idea what it means. Because what they do here is, they just teach you to learn stuff off by heart. They just go, 'Barukh ata Adonai' which means it's a prayer. You don't know what 'Barukh' means – it's just part of a prayer. And even so, that's ancient Hebrew. So, I think I know two words in modern Hebrew: those are 'triangle' and the word for 'OK'. And that's the only words I know in Modern Hebrew. And that's a bit disappointing since I've come here every week for seven years (David).
>
> Do you know, I still don't know the word for 'I am'. And only last week I learned how to say, 'You' or 'He'. But I can say 'Sovereign of the Universe' because that is what they want you to learn (David).

The feelings of frustration as expressed by David arise from a disjuncture between learning to read a liturgical language and a modern language and from expectations carried from one setting to another (in this case, David's experiences of learning French in his mainstream school). This learner is left with a great frustration about learning a language that he cannot use to communicate or make meaning with in the way he wishes and expects to. He expresses a deep frustration with being taught to read by rote rather than with meaning.

David reveals the expectations he brings from other sites of learning and his desire to learn Hebrew as an everyday, modern language that he can use to communicate. He reveals this when he describes how he expects, and would like to learn Hebrew:

> So (if you were really learning Hebrew) you would start off logically. You would go, 'OK nouns. This is a noun. This is how you say, 'I am'. This is how you say, 'I have'' and so on and so forth until, then you would start translating stuff. And that's how I learnt French (David).

The expression of this frustration is an important addition to our understandings of learning to read in community schools and across a range of settings (and goes some way to answering Schachter's question regarding how contemporary learners experience the learning of Hebrew in Jewish supplementary schools). It does not appear in other accounts of learning to read in community settings because learners' voices and experiences are nearly always missing from these accounts. David revealed he felt bored at his Sunday school because he was not learning a language in a way that he could use it or speak it.

> I also get kind of bored here.... in Year 3 through to Year 6 I was bored out of my mind. (Interviewer: What would make it more interesting?) ... They could, you know, try and teach you stuff, instead of just saying, you know, 'Learn stuff by heart (David)

David was very interested in languages ('I like languages') and thought that they were very useful when you can speak them. He wanted the school to be more challenging and interesting. David's 'there is something very wrong with how we learn here' is a strong

articulation of an experience of disjuncture, of what it is like to be a learner situated between two very different orientations to reading and two very different kinds of 'reading' as well as the lack of engagement that is experienced when learning is by rote. It reveals the insights that learners have about their learning experiences and, at the same time, how experiences and expectations from one site of learning are carried over into other sites and the effect of this on learners.

While the other learners did not express the same degree of frustration and boredom as David they did reveal that while one of their motivations for coming to the school was to learn another language, one which they thought would allow them to communicate with others, they found themselves, as they approached their BM, unable to communicate in Hebrew. They spoke about not knowing the meaning of many words and how the focus in their learning to read, as they approached their BM, was on pronunciation and being able to recite and say their portion. Nicola commented on the fact that she never claimed to know Hebrew despite having been learning Hebrew for eight years, 'because I can't really speak it. I can just read it...it's like half a language'.

All of the learners were able to articulate what they wanted as learners whilst attending the school. David was very clear that as well as learning Hebrew so that he could communicate with others he wanted the work to be harder and more consistent and challenging. Stephen also wanted to be challenged more. Hugh wanted more 'fun activities' as he felt that he learned best when relaxed and having fun. Nicola also felt that the school had to be fun, 'people don't want to spend Sundays being bored or doing worksheets like Monday-Friday school'. These answers revealed that the learners wanted to be engaged by their learning – through challenge or through learning actively and collaboratively.

These comments from the learners touched on a dilemma that the teachers identified in their interviews: whether to provide a curriculum centred around interactive activities and 'fun' so that their learners had a better learning experience and through which opportunities were provided for meaning making and communicating or to provide a curriculum that focused on rote learning as this was the only way of getting learning 'to stick'.

> I think you have to say... (either) the kids are going to have a great time .... and they are not going to learn everything off by heart or you say 'fine' ... and we make them learn by heart. I don't think you can achieve the same results without doing that (making the learners learn by heart) (Sarah)

It became clear through the interviews with the children and their teachers that there was a challenge at the heart of the pedagogic enterprise within the school: making learning interesting, challenging and 'useful' versus making it stick so that the learners could take part in their BM and other religious rituals and observances. The learners (and their teachers) find themselves learning (and teaching) in a situation where two orientations to learning, and teaching, have come together. On the one hand there is the curriculum underpinned by values of collaborative learning with a focus on making learning engaging in tension with an

approach to learning, particularly from Year 7, which focuses on learning by rote and repetition in order to retain and 'sediment' the learning of sacred texts. These two different approaches and understandings of learning and reading are acted out in the experiences of the learners' and in their teachers' practice and, it would appear from the learners, and their teachers', accounts that these practices cannot be syncretised and blended.

Conclusions

It is clear that the learners interviewed have an astute understanding of their Jewish school's approaches to reading Hebrew. Whilst it is clear that their reasons for attending the school are about 'belonging', some of the learners did not expect their learning of Hebrew to be simply, and only, a symbolic act of belonging and meaning making. They brought expectations garnered from learning other languages about communication and making meaning to what they wanted and expected from learning Hebrew. This expectation was supported by the use of collaborative activities in the early stages of learning to read and the similarity in the method of teaching reading (a synthetic phonics approach) across their mainstream schools and their Sunday school. One learner was disappointed by an absence of opportunity to make meaning and the others were resigned to not being able to use their Hebrew and were content to learn by rote in order to take part in the important symbolic act of joining and belonging which was their BM.

This exploration of learners' experiences has revealed much of what happens as learners move between and through sites of learning: how they bring expectations and orientations to learning that have been acquired in other sites or at other times. This adds to Wu's articulation of learning sites as dynamic and interconnected through the experiences of the teachers (2006) by showing how they are also interconnected through the experiences of learners who bring to bear their expectations and desires about learning from other sites of learning. This exploration also speaks to and adds to research which has presented the learner as actively able to combine and blend together their learning from different sites and settings (cf Gregory 2013a and 2013d). Whilst the children's attendance at the Jewish school clearly allows for the development of an array of complex language and literacy skills, the learners' articulation of their experiences reveals the disjunctures and tensions that also exist between and across sites of learning and the different orientations to learning that are required in different sites. We are also afforded some insight into non-compliant learners through David's comments: these are remarkably absent from other research accounts but of importance in directing attention to why some learners are bored or stop attending community classes.

In relation to learning, despite their regular attendance over many years at the school, none of the learners claimed that they were able to read in Hebrew and the research confirms Miller's finding that the standard of reading is poor in Jewish supplementary schools (Miller, 2010). None of the learners said that they could read an untaught text with any fluency (Schachter, 2010) nor spoke about any contribution that their learning in their community school had made to their learning in their mainstream school. While learning in their faith setting had clearly provided opportunities for the development of complex language and literacy skills,

the learning of some Hebrew and the ability to decode and recite a text, it is important to hear what the learners say themselves about the effectiveness of their learning and what they feel they have achieved.

The interviews with the learners, and teachers, reveal the complexities and tensions around pedagogy in the school. The findings suggest that in the absence of a knowledge of the oral language and the means and time to gain this, collaborative, engaging teaching activities may not be successful in teaching reading when the intention is to offer learners access to a sacred text that needs to be retained and 'sedimented' (Rosowsky, 2013a). To think of teaching reading in terms of teaching a song rather than of how to read a story may be fruitful here. These are pertinent findings in light of the fact that there are reports about a move towards more engaging, collaborative learning activities being introduced into Mosque Schools in the UK in an endeavour to create more coherence, and engagement, for young learners (Race, 2015). The findings reported in this paper go to the heart of questions about appropriate pedagogy and prompt us to question whether different conceptions and purposes of 'reading' require different orientations and approaches to learning and teaching reading as well as how learners can be engaged, challenged and provided with opportunities to develop all their literacies and languages to a high level.

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