

## A Sense of Distance through the Classroom Window

Alex Pomson

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**Abstract** The paper argues that the practices of schools—frequently seen by sociologists as accurate mirrors of society—confirm many of the claims made by Cohen and Kelman. The widespread uptake by day schools of an advocacy approach to Israel education, and the shift to a pedagogy of enculturation from one of instruction, testify to a decline in attachment and a loss of self-confidence among families and communities. The cultivation of attachment to Israel has been sub-contracted to schools where often it is focused on a singular limited performance: advocacy for Israel during the few years that students spend on university campuses.

**Keywords** Distancing hypothesis · Jewish day schools · Advocacy and enculturation

If schools mirror society, as long claimed by sociologists of education (Waller 1939/1975; Apple 1995; Tyack and Cuban 1995), then the approach to teaching about Israel in the Jewish day schools of North America reflects the social situation depicted by Cohen and Kelman in their *Beyond Distancing* research. This is the impression that emerges from two recent studies of the practices and pedagogy of Israel education in more than three hundred North American non-haredi Jewish day schools (Pomson et al. 2009a; Pomson et al. 2009a). These studies add local detail—additional “soft evidence”—to the sociological picture that Cohen and Kelman develop.

The two studies of day school Israel education, conducted by a team at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University, used a mix of methodologies. The research involved a survey of all non-haredi day schools in North America, an analysis of more than seventy publicly available curricula for teaching about Israel in

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A. Pomson (✉)

Melton Centre for Jewish Education, Hebrew University, Mount Scopus 91905, Jerusalem  
e-mail: apomson@mscc.huji.ac.il

schools, qualitative site-based research at fifteen schools across the continent, and a cataloguing of more than forty extracurricular programs and products offered to schools for the purposes of Israel education. The research found—disappointingly—that Israel education in day schools lacks clear educational purposes; is undermined by poorly coordinated and fragmented practices; is distorted by an over-reliance on informal educational experiences that are often sub-contracted to external providers; and is bombarded by a confusion of initiatives that purport to solve the disconnection between American Jewish youth and the State of Israel.

To communicate the findings of these studies in starker terms: they found that Israel education in day schools has come to strongly resemble the form and content of the Jewish education provided in supplementary or congregational schools.

In the first place, day school Israel education looks a great deal like many of the Bar Mitzva programs provided in congregational settings. As is well known, decades ago, initiation into Jewish majority status devolved from the family and the wider community to the congregational school, and came to focus—at least from the perspective of consumers—on preparation for a single, time-limited and spatially bounded, performance (Schoenfeld 1988). By analogy, over recent years, day schools have been assigned responsibility for cultivating knowledge, attitudes and behaviors in relation to Israel that were previously nurtured by a variety of community institutions. Today, moreover, this task is increasingly focused on preparation for a singular, similarly limited performance: advocacy for Israel during the few years that students spend on university campuses.

If this analogy seems harsh, given the bad press Bar Mitzva preparation has received over many years, the comparison of these two educational enterprises reveals more than it hides. It certainly reinforces the notion that even among those adult Jews conventionally classified as highly affiliated—those ready to pay many thousands of dollars a year for their children’s Jewish schooling—there is a palpable lack of confidence (and perhaps interest) in their capacity to cultivate attachment to Israel in their children. Parents have subcontracted this task to schools.

In recent years, Israel advocacy programs in day schools have flourished. The David Project, founded in 2002, and today the most prominent purveyor of an advocacy approach, claims that its program is being used in more than one hundred schools—equivalent to about a third of modern Orthodox and liberal day schools.<sup>1</sup> At least half-a-dozen other organizations promise outcomes such as “to prepare Jewish teens for the anti-Israel sentiment they will face on campus...and to empower [them] with concrete skills, advocacy training and the ability to respond to anti-Israel rhetoric in an intelligent and informed manner”; this from the Caravan for Democracy, surprisingly perhaps “an initiative of the JNF.”<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that the upsurge in such programs is not because activist pressure groups have captured the day school agenda through fear-mongering or special largesse; in my experience day school heads can be remarkably resistant to the importuning of single-issue lobbyists even when they come bearing gifts or wielding sticks. If the pressure to embrace this approach to Israel education comes

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.davidproject.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=108&Itemid=131](http://www.davidproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=108&Itemid=131)

<sup>2</sup> <http://support.jnf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=caravanfordemocracy>

from anywhere, it originates with parents, a constituency that few school heads can indefinitely resist. Historically, when families have lacked the time, expertise and other resources to educate their children, they have passed them over to schools (Coleman 1994). This has happened with Israel education. Families and communities increasingly lack the wherewithal to connect the next generation to Israel. They may once have relied on Zionist youth movements to carry out this task, but those organizations have long been in terminal decline, and so they have turned to specialists in schools.

The advocacy bandwagon betrays not only a decline in attachment but also a loss of self-confidence. Ostensibly concerned with preparing students to persuade others of the case for Israel, curriculum analysis and site-based interviews reveal that these efforts seem no less intended to convince day school students themselves of Israel's merits. To take up the terms from a previous controversy in which Cohen was embroiled, these programs look more like a case of inreach than outreach. Indeed, given that only a small proportion of the graduates of these programs can assume leadership of the Israel advocacy fight on campus (after all, how many leaders is there room for?), one presumes that these programs are concerned less with producing leaders and more with fortifying the hearts and minds of the rank and file ahead of their "coming of age" on campus.

A second characteristic of day school Israel education reinforces the impression that Israel education today is designed first and foremost to win over a disinterested and "distanced" audience, even if the audience is located close to the core of the affiliated community.

When school leaders reflect on where and how they have greatest impact on students' understanding of and relationship to Israel, the great majority point to programs and interventions that occur outside the classroom spaces where their students spend the bulk of their time. For non-Orthodox schools, it tends to be the Israel trip that most schools organize; for the Orthodox, it is those special programs and experiences they provide during the course of the year or the relationships children develop with Israeli personnel in the school. Looking closely at the materials that schools use in the classroom, one finds that these tend to be heavily skewed toward an "experiential" rather than a "cognitive" perspective. That is, they emphasize their relevance to the students' lives and experiences rather than focus on abstract concepts or academic content.

These findings raise the possibility that in the field of Israel education we are witnessing a similar change to that once called for in congregational education, a shift to a paradigm of "enculturation" from one of "instruction" (Aron 1987). Enculturation, according to Aron (one its strongest proponents), constitutes the broadly conceived task of introducing children to a set of values and norms, and initiating them into a culture and its commitments. Instruction is a more narrowly conceived task that assumes the child's pre-existing commitment to a culture and society; it is concerned with helping children acquire knowledge of the ideas and skills that society values. Enculturation, Aron argued, is advanced by providing young people with well conceived and positive Jewish experiences; instruction occurs typically within the walls of the classroom in an interaction between the teacher and learner. In recent years, many congregational schools have followed

Aron down the enculturative route, abandoning the classroom and embracing the practices of experiential education.

When it comes to Israel education, day schools also seem to be engaged in enculturative work. Both non-Orthodox and Orthodox schools are seeking to cultivate commitments and inculcate values by providing students with formative experiences. This is no small matter, since schools have conventionally been sites for instruction rather than enculturation; instruction is what most teachers are trained to do; enculturation is what educators used to do in youth movements and camps. However, as I argue above, schools simply don't seem ready to assume that students' commitments are firm enough that, as educators, they can focus on instruction. As one head of school told a member of our research team, in Jewish terms, his school has become a "camp with AP courses."

Again, one might question how accurate a sense schools have of their students' needs and commitments. Perhaps, they have been panicked by the work of scholars such as Cohen and Kelman into operating in an enculturative and advocacy mode. Their practices may be as flawed as the theories on which they are based. It might therefore be inappropriate to draw conclusions from school practice back to the condition of the community.

However, while such arguments are reasonable in the abstract, they discount the remarkable sensitivity of the consumers of day school education to the product they receive. Day school parents—especially when they pay high fees—are not slow to alert schools when there is a mismatch between their needs or expectations and what the schools provide. If anything, in my work with schools, I have found that the challenge for educators is to advance anything other than a minimalistic/fearful/kneejerk approach to Israel education, against the tide of consumer expectation. Repeatedly, educators complain that they'd like to pursue a more rigorous, reflective or balanced approach to the study of Israel (as they do with other school subject areas) but that it won't resonate with where their families and faculty are situated.

For the heads of many of America's Jewish day schools, the distance of their consumers from Israel is not a matter of academic debate. Attuned to the context in which they operate, they have an unambiguous sense of a changed social reality and of how it constrains their work.

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### **Author Biography**

**Alex Pomson** is a Senior Researcher at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.