

Day School Parents and their Children's Schools

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Background

For good reason, most research literature on schooling focuses on the experiences of students or teachers. Schools originally were devised to prepare children for life within particular religious, social or occupational communities, and, in more recent times, to ready them as productive citizens in the broader, industrialized society.¹ Understandably, educational research largely has been concerned with the triangle of the child, the teacher and the curriculum—those core elements in the educational process that socialize young people to the values and wisdom of earlier generations and that help youths fulfill their potential.²

When parents have been the focus of educational research, they invariably have been viewed as factors within a larger milieu that influences what occurs inside schools.³ Educational researchers have studied parents insofar as their presence or absence has shaped the quality of children's education. Thus, in the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, parents are recognized as an important "out-of-school factor that affects school performance."⁴

Over the last decade, however, as charter schools, education vouchers and public debate about school choice have become an increasingly visible part of the educational landscape, there has been a move toward a more dialectical recognition of the relationships between parents and their children's education. At the very least, parents' school choice has been researched not only for how it affects children's education, but for how it serves as a marker or facet of parents' own identities.

Although there is empirical evidence indicating that many parents do not shop around for schools, instead choosing the school that is closest and cheapest, for many selecting a school for their child is a moment of profound self-definition.⁵ For some, there are few personal decisions fraught with greater weight. Researchers, therefore, have begun to pay attention to what lies behind school choice and to what can be learned about parents' identities from the lead-up to this decision. This implies a growing recognition not only that parents play a role in their children's education, but that their children's schooling plays some role in their own adult lives.⁶

In this paper, I seek to examine whether schools not only serve as markers of parents' commitments when they choose a particular school for their children, but whether schools contribute at all to the

construction of parents' identities in an ongoing fashion. Simply, I seek to determine whether parents are changed by their children's schools.

In theoretical terms, this inquiry is grounded in a post-structural view of identity as constantly adapting in response to and as a direct result of the "dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition."⁷ This does not mean that selves do not exist or are unrecognizable; rather, as Hall has suggested, that they are apprehended in the positions people adopt (or are forced to adopt) at different times and places.⁸ People's performances are what make them momentarily who they are.

With this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that parents are influenced by their involvements in their children's schools, and that they may even be influenced by their children's schools more than the schools are influenced by them. If, as post-structural theorists suggest, our performances express not only who we are but also change us, then how we involve ourselves in our children's education (at home, at school, in parent committees, in meetings with teachers, and when talking with our children) will have some effect on who we are.

A second theoretical premise underlying this inquiry, and its particular interest in how Jewish schools shape the identities of parents, derives from the work of Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen on contemporary Jewish identity. Cohen and Eisen have argued that the meaning of Judaism increasingly transpires within the self and that the significance of group identity has been drawn into the subjectivity of the individual, the activities of the family, and the few institutions seen as extensions of the intimate sphere.⁹ Though they don't say so explicitly, their argument suggests that, in some cases at least, the Jewish school may constitute a primary arena for "privatized adult Jewish involvement." A study of Jewish parents and their children's schools therefore may tell us about the evolution of adult Jewish identities and about the possibilities for Jewish schools serving as a locus for adult Jewish life.

In empirical terms, this inquiry grows out of a long-term study of life in a Jewish day school. The school study began as an attempt to develop a theoretically grounded inquiry into Jewish schooling and the extent to which it presents a genuine alternative to the vision of education put forth by the public school system.¹⁰ By the end of the study's five-month pilot phase, it became apparent that a significant part of the data collected related to the presence of parents in classrooms, school corridors and committees. In the spirit of a grounded theory orientation to qualitative research, I was led by the data's composition toward considering why parents were so much of a presence in their children's school. I wondered what was happening to them as a consequence of their involvement and whether, on some level, they

were attracted to the school and active in its life not so much because of what it promised their children but because of what it offered them as adults.

This paper, then, constitutes an experimental inquiry into the role of Jewish schools in the lives of Jewish parents. It is structured around a series of ethnographic vignettes drawn from field notes, observations and interviews. These vignettes provide the resources for discussing what may be happening when parents are deeply involved in their children's schools.

Setting

In May 2002, I approached the board members of Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School (hereafter: DJDS) with a request to conduct a long-term study in their school. I was interested in learning what happens in Canadian Jewish day schools and determining if the contemporary Jewish day school essentially is a variant of other North American schools, or if it represents a genuinely alternative moral and spiritual enterprise. As an occasional visitor to DJDS in my role as supervisor of teacher candidates, it seemed to me that the school's curriculum and orientation made it well suited to an examination of this research goal.

DJDS is a private, Jewish, religiously pluralist, all-day elementary school founded by a group of parents in a downtown Toronto neighborhood that once was home to a major concentration of Jews but that today bears few traces of this former community. When the study commenced, the school was four years old and consisted of 70 students in five grades, from senior kindergarten to grade 4. All of the students were being raised as Jews, but many had parents with minimal attachments to the organized Jewish community.

The school is representative of an emerging trend in contemporary North American Jewish life. It was established with matching funds provided by a private Jewish foundation with the explicit intent of attracting children who otherwise would not attend a Jewish day school. Over the last decade, this same foundation has helped launch more than 40 such schools.

For many at DJDS and in the wider community, the school's downtown location is not only a geographic fact that explains its appeal to a community without recent access to day-school education, it is indicative of where the school is located in the social and cultural landscape. As one of the school's early promotional brochures puts it, "living and learning downtown implies a commitment to diversity, an openness to what the city has to offer, and pluralism in action."

Although this characterization is highly idealized, it by no means is disconnected from reality. It is a construction that shapes how people in

the school talk about themselves and the institution. This is a Jewish day school that exhibits unusual openness to non-traditional family structures: nearly one quarter of the students have parents who are intermarried, same-sex, or single. There also is no doubt as to the school's commitment to religious and ideological pluralism, evidenced in its liberal staffing policy, progressive curriculum and inclusive classroom practice. According to its mission statement, the school seeks to build a pluralistic and tolerant community through integrating "Jewish and secular studies while encouraging artistic expression as a tool of learning." These goals communicate a vision for Jewish education that is distinct from most other day schools in the region.

With few exceptions, DJDS families live in and around the city's downtown core, an area that is home to extremes of wealth and poverty. In socioeconomic terms, however, the school's diversity owes not so much to wealth—only a quarter of students receive subsidies toward the annual fee of more than \$10,000—but in the different ways parents are employed. While the parent body includes many lawyers and accountants, there are many more parents who work in the creative arts (dance, film, music), intellectual professions (journalism, psychiatry, higher education), and welfare services (nursing, education, social work). The school's unusual board composition includes a pastry chef, costume designer and national newspaper editor—all of whom have children in the school.

This is a highly educated group of people, many of whom have been attracted to the downtown area because of its proximity to cultural institutions and to a major North American university. The parents seek an intellectual environment for their children and take seriously the school's promise of academic excellence.

DJDS parents differ from typical suburban day-school parents in many ways. They are less interested in living in large houses with gardens than in having access to public transit and a sense of a neighborhood community. A surprising number neither own cars nor know how to drive. They also tend to be older, having started their families late, often in their 30s and 40s. Consequently, they have fewer children—most only have one or two. A small number have adopted children, which explains the presence of children of color in the school.

For most parents, living downtown is an expression of intent to disengage from organized and denominational Jewish life. This is a part of town where few Jewish organizations have a presence. Very few parents are members at Jewish institutions other than the downtown JCC where the school itself is located. Few families are members of synagogues. Those who attend services tend to prefer the style at a local traditional egalitarian service than in one of the denominational congregations in the city's midtown neighborhoods.

Although the parents are committing substantial sums of money to their children's Jewish schooling, they remain ambivalent about core components in the curriculum: God, Israel, Jewish particularism, tradition. They indicate that they are still working out their own positions on these issues. Almost uniformly, parents admit that they never expected to be sending their children to a Jewish day school. Although half of the founding parents attended Jewish day school themselves, they make clear that much of the appeal of DJDS is that it offers a different educational experience from the one they remember. Parents emphasize that if DJDS were not an option, they would not be sending their children to a Jewish day school. Most would have pursued options within the public system—French immersion or alternative schools—while some would have opted for “boutique” private schools such as Waldorf or Montessori.

In many respects, the parents act and sound like the participants in the studies by Cohen and Eisen, and Bethamie Horowitz.¹¹ Their Jewish lives are fluid and draw on diverse, often unconventional, resources. In most cases, it would have been difficult to predict their decision to send their children to a Jewish day school. Indeed, if not for their involvement in the school, they probably would not have been connected or associated with one another. What they share, above all, is their “downtown-ness”—or, to put it more formally, their shared alienation from suburban Jewish life. For a researcher, their profile and interaction was part of what made the school—as a new kind of Jewish educational institution serving an unconventional parent body—such an intriguing place for study.

Method

After meeting with the DJDS board, I was granted permission to join the school as a participant researcher and to immerse myself in every aspect of school life. My theoretical starting point was grounded in a post-structural view of culture as neither unified nor fixed. From this perspective, school culture can be viewed not as a singular entity that reproduces or challenges the social and political relations of the surrounding society,¹² but rather as an “interface of individual and collective responses to the problem of how best to educate the child.”¹³ I hoped that by immersing myself as a researcher in the totality of DJDS life, I might expose the range of responses within the school to the problem of how best to be both North American and Jewish—a question that Jonathan Sarna suggests has served as a central axis in the development of Jewish schooling over the last two centuries.¹⁴

In embarking on such a broadly conceived inquiry, I turned to Alan Peshkin's ethnographic studies of private schools for a methodological template.¹⁵ Peshkin's work offers an example of how to draw together

multiple data sources in order “to show what a [particular] school is really like” and “to identify its most typical characteristics.”¹⁶ Under Peshkin’s influence, I resolved to observe the rituals, routines, performances and practices of members of the school in order to begin developing an account of what Spindler calls “webs of meaning.”¹⁷ I intended to deepen this account through ongoing examination of relevant school documents. To triangulate observational and documentary data, I planned to organize a mix of in-depth, individualized and focus-group interviews with the full range of school community members.

I launched this research program with a pilot study in which I experimented with a variety of research probes. For four months, I joined students from Grade 1 to Grade 4 in their classrooms and at special events and performances. I sat in on staff meetings, parent gatherings, open houses, special events for prospective parents, and the annual curriculum night. I attended school board meetings as well as meetings of the school’s marketing committee and religious and educational policy committee. I interviewed those who had served as administrators since the school’s launch and held a focus group for some of the founding parents. I collected a variety of written artifacts, including the school’s weekly newsletter, promotional material for prospective parents, announcements of special events in the school, the latest draft of the school’s curriculum, copies of all memos sent from administration to staff during this period, as well as memos and emails related to some of the board’s subcommittees.

Findings

These activities generated a substantial quantity of data concerning the life and culture of DJDS that will feed into a longer-term study. For now, as I review the themes that emerge from this material, I am struck by how so much of what I saw and heard in the school involved the participation or presence of parents. It is possible, of course, that these occasions were brought to my attention precisely because “informants” viewed them as exceptional. However, the frequency of these episodes (occurring sometimes two or three times a week) suggests a different reading that points to the pervasiveness of parental involvement in school life.

In this section, I will examine those times when parents were present and highlight the extent to which those occasions depart from normal practices in private schools. Then, I will present a small number of vignettes in which “informants” talked about or revealed what their involvement in the school meant for them. In the final section of the paper, I will reflect on what these findings suggest about the role of schools in parents’ lives and the role of parents in school life.

When and how are parents involved?

In most instances, Jewish day schools are privately funded institutions governed by parent groups involved intensively in day-to-day operations. It is not unusual for parents to participate in aspects of a school's administration, funding and programming. Materials produced by the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education attest to at least 20 different arenas where parents can (helpfully) involve themselves in day-school life.¹⁸ Anecdotally, there also is evidence that parents find numerous additional ways to involve themselves (less helpfully) in their children's schools.

In all of these respects, DJDS is much like other private schools. It calls on the intense participation of parent "volunteers" to share a wide range of formal responsibilities, including membership on some of the 11 committees of the school's board and the 13 committees operated by the parent association.¹⁹ Parents are invited to volunteer in a variety of less formal ways, too, such as helping with the celebration of Shabbat in the classroom, facilitating educational book orders, and reading aloud to small groups. Finally, parents also offer unsolicited input to teachers and administrators over matters including security arrangements, classroom guests and food policies.

If DJDS differs from other schools, it is not in the fact that parents are involved in school life but rather in the intensity and range of their involvement. Although there are activist members in the parent bodies of most schools, there probably are not many schools where parents volunteer as much as 15 hours a week, as appears to be the case for a select group at DJDS. The scope of their involvement also seems unusual. During my four months at the school, parents were prominent participants in a variety of special events (including the annual book fair, the open house for prospective parents, and curriculum night) as well as in a number of regular program activities (such as lunch-time clubs, after-school arrangements and school choir), which, in other schools, likely would be the responsibility of paid professionals. All of this was in addition to their participation in a range of social and educational events that are more typical of schools' parent association programs.

Why are parents involved?

The intensity and scope of parental involvement may derive from the circumstances of the school's origins. The school was founded by parents who, despite their widely divergent backgrounds, came together to shape its distinctive mission. Some of these individuals continue to be highly invested in its development. The school opened about six years ago with 10 students in two classes. Resources were so stretched at the time that faculty relied on parents to support the formal

curriculum in a cooperative spirit that has continued even as the school has grown. Due to the school's downtown location, the parent body also exhibits a range of artistic talents unusual in a Jewish school but valuable as a curriculum resource. It is possible, also, that because parents were taking so much of a risk when enrolling their children during the first few years of the fledgling institution, they were reluctant to withdraw from the classrooms to allow the professionals to do their work. This has normalized their continued presence even though the school today is much less of a risk for parents. Finally, though the school has grown, there still are only 70 children from 54 families enrolled. Therefore, some parents are more intensely involved than they might be in an institution where more people are available to share responsibilities.

If these constitute external reasons for the intensity of parent involvement, there also is evidence of internal motivations. These less mundane motivations are best explored though an ethnographic approach that draws on a variety of sources in which parents convey the significance of the school in their lives through their actions and words. I will present three vignettes that offer suggestions as to these deeper motivations, and then I will suggest their implications for theories on schooling and community.

Vignette 1: Drama at the REPC

One of the most fertile venues for adult involvement in the school is the board's Religious and Educational Policy Committee (REPC). This committee is made up of a diverse group that includes parents, members of the downtown Jewish community, one grandparent, and the school's two senior administrators. At the time of the research, the committee had just been reconstituted under the leadership of two new chairpersons whose backgrounds demonstrate the school's non-traditional demographics: one, a non-Jewish parent in an interfaith family, the other, a gay parent and partner in a single-sex family with extensive experience in a variety of Jewish educational settings.

At the year's first meeting, the chairs worked carefully to develop inclusive and effective procedures for the committee's operation. Then, in late November, they spent the year's first substantive meeting discussing school policy on religious pluralism. This did not produce any major decisions but led to a commitment to communicate existing policies to parents and to "explain how teachers practice pluralism."

Within a week of this meeting, however, the chairs convened an emergency meeting to respond to questions raised by a distraught parent about the school's "commitment to diversity"—the very matter just considered by the committee. These questions were provoked by the scheduling of a pre-Chanukah event in the school to be led by a local

rabbi whose views—at least as far as could be determined from his affiliations—were viewed as “blatantly intolerant of and hostile to” minority groups within the school. Writing as a gay member of the school community, this parent asked others “to entertain the anguish that many feel in being asked to honor the ‘rights’ of others who actively seek to diminish or erase our own rights.” She explained that her family “had suffered immeasurably when they left [their] synagogue after finding [they] didn’t qualify as a ‘family.’” In contrast, as she made clear, the school was a place that made no such judgments about her life. “Without any exaggeration I can tell you that DJDS has been and continues to be a great love in my life. The community is important to us and we have always felt safe.”

In the days before the emergency meeting, members of the committee, communicating largely by email, articulated their responses to the issues provoked by this parent’s appeal to withdraw the rabbi’s invitation. My account of this episode draws on email transcripts circulated between committee members before the meeting and on field notes taken during and after it.

This episode has all of the qualities of a “social drama” as originally conceived by Turner and applied by Reimer pertaining to the study of culture in Jewish schools.²⁰ The episode began with a *breach*, “the public non-fulfillment of some crucial norm regulating the intercourse of ...parties”,²¹ when the parent challenged the school’s practices and what she described as its “fluctuating philosophies.” This breach quickly became a *crisis*, when the chairs called an emergency meeting of the REPC. In so doing, they did not limit the breach but extended its impact by suggesting that this moment called for the consideration of difficult questions about “how we define and understand Jewish religious pluralism” and “what obligation we have toward protecting the rights, safety and dignity of all our students and families.”

Turner suggests that a third phase in social dramas is one of *redressive action*. This occurs when “leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed social system” act to limit the spread of the crisis through the use of a variety of mechanisms that “may range from personal advice and informal mediation...to the performance of public ritual”.²² In this instance, the chairperson of the school board and some of the REPC members introduced into the discussion a way to recognize the points of difference between the rabbi and most of the school’s families. The method enabled him, “if he has something valuable to share,” to come into the school, provided he “respects every child and parent—our diversity.”

This course of action offered a route towards *reintegration*, a final phase in the social drama, in which the committee worked on

collectively acceptable language for a revised policy on religious pluralism. This course of action was preceded during the “liminal” phases of the drama by another subtle but powerful form of redressive action—what Turner identifies as “the performance of public ritual.”

In a number of emails on the matter, committee members reminded their colleagues that the discussion—what originally had been called the emergency—was itself a reflection of values within the school. That, they noted, called for celebration. As one member put it, “it is a credit to our school that such discussion could be pursued and constructive solutions sought out.” Another member, in a beautifully crafted letter, wrote that it was precisely the values threatened by this crisis that provided a guide for how to construct policy in this case.

It is worth quoting at length from this parent’s statement because it demonstrates how social dramas can serve as opportunities for reaffirming group loyalty. The letter begins with a reminder of the school’s core values and what the author calls its vision. “I love our school and I am very proud of the community we have built together. We are diverse and yet we stand together, supporting each other as we craft a thoughtful and exciting vision.” As the author goes on to indicate, it was precisely in the consistent application of these values that a course of action for this difficult situation was suggested:

At DJDS we teach our children respect for diversity. Respect means treating people as worthy or cherished human beings. We do not generalize or label but meet people on their own terms. And we have the same respect for guests we bring into our school... As a school community we recognize that Jewish families and Jewish practice exist on a continuum and, as far as I see it, we don’t lightly dismiss someone as “off the continuum.” As with most attempts to draw a sharp distinction between the good “us” and the bad “other,” the delegitimization of Rabbi [X], and [his movement] in general, ignores the fact that what we share in common is so much more significant than what separates us... Our school is a haven where exclusion and denigration of other Jews is not okay.

Perhaps it is not surprising given the constructive—one might say devotional—tone of later email contributions that by the time the committee met, much of the tension had dissipated. The drama had moved into a final phase of *reintegration*. Although some committee members were still pained by what the rabbi’s presence implied, there was a general sense within the committee that the discussion had helped members develop or discover their shared values. Indeed, it was agreed that this “traumatic” experience had helped the committee come much closer to developing a stance toward pluralism than had its earlier discussion.

As I have tried to convey, this episode resonates with Turner's characterization of an emergent social drama as a mirror in which members of a society can discover their shared values and commitments. From the perspective of research, this drama also serves as a window on the values and motivations of the school community that often are hidden from view.

Clearly, the school is not only a vehicle for teaching children. It is a site for adult learning. As one member of the committee wrote toward the end of the email discussion, "This has turned into the most incredible learning experience for me. I am not sure I have a strong feeling of what the committee should decide on this issue, but I sure am grateful to have been part of this very informative dialogue." Significantly, for this person, the policy question—the ostensible business of the committee—was secondary to what she learned from the drama about Jewish values and ideas. This was not an unusual reaction. My field notes from the email exchange and from the committee meeting are filled with references to the richness of the learning, as members swapped reading recommendations and discussed each other's ideas. The mood of the discussion may have been emotional, but in effect was not unlike a university seminar on the topics of pluralism, Hasidism, and contemporary Judaism.

The drama reveals another powerful aspect of the school's role in the lives of parents. As indicated by the genesis of this episode and by the language people used, the school provides many parents with a sense of community that they cannot find in other Jewish institutions. For the parent who first expressed her concerns, the school provides her with a sense of belonging that she does not find in her synagogue. At the school, she and her children counted as a "family;" in the synagogue, they did not. The school is perhaps the only Jewish institution where they can "always feel safe."

This is a notion that resonated with other parents, for whom the school is "a haven where denigration and exclusion of other Jews is not okay," or, as another member put it, where there is "a safe environment for our children and their families." In these respects, the school is distinguished from most other arenas for adult Jewish involvement. For downtown Jews, alienated from denominational Jewish life, DJDS is not only a place where they and their children can learn, it is where they can belong. The school provides a vehicle for realizing a vision of a different kind of Jewish community, which, as I will argue in the final section of the paper, verges on the utopian.

Vignette 2: *Schmoozefest*

I have offered a detailed account of this episode because I think it makes explicit, through the parents' own words, a view of the school as

a haven and as a site of adult learning, both of which are significant motivations for membership. Although at the time I didn't see it so clearly, my first encounter with this perspective came at a mid-September event for new parents and their "buddies"—those parents with whom they were matched when they first joined the school.

This event, advertised as "DJDS New Family: Orientation and *Shmoozefest*," was billed as "a great opportunity to get all those questions answered." It turned into that and more when, at the start of the evening, the principal suggested that before the formal proceedings start, we go around the room and each say a few words about ourselves and how we came to the school. The principal's intent was to give people an opportunity to break the ice, but as people began to talk emotionally about their relationship to the school, the meeting assumed a confessional quality that was entirely unexpected.

Because this event occurred soon after the start of my work in the school, I did not feel bold enough to operate a tape recorder during the proceedings. Therefore, I have relied here on field notes composed immediately after the event and on notes the school's marketing officer wrote down as people were speaking.

Before considering the substance of what was discussed at this event, it is important to recognize that the public nature of the setting probably constrained some of what people shared and what they wanted to be seen as saying. In addition, it is worth noting that those who attended this event in their roles as "buddies" did not constitute a random sample of DJDS families. They were the school's most committed parents who had volunteered or had been invited to mentor new members of the community.

For these reasons, the data here should be seen as indicative rather than representative. They reveal only what people say about their motivations, not what one can assume are widely shared concerns. Nevertheless, even taking these constraints into account, the group's comments make evident that people choose Jewish schools for a dazzling array of reasons, some of which have little to do with their own identities as adults. Thus, one parent viewed DJDS as a "natural" choice, having sent her child to the unaffiliated Jewish nursery in the same building shared by the school. Another parent was attracted to the school's size for the special academic needs of the parent's child. A number of families were drawn to the school because of certain features in the curriculum: its emphasis on the arts, its creativity, its integrative approach to teaching Judaism, its overall quality. One parent said she was looking for a school that was as much as possible like camp. In all of these instances, the school appealed to parents because of what it offered their children in academic, social or spiritual terms.

If these constitute conventional expressions of how parents think about their children's schools, a number of other comments confirm that additional factors, deriving from parents' own particular identities, play a role in how they think about their children's schooling. One couple explained how important it was that other parents in the school also had children late in life. Another couple indicated that they were drawn to a school where other families shared their values, such as making charitable donations rather than buying gifts for friends' birthdays, and where other parents dressed like them—enabling the couple to attend school meetings in bicycle gear. For one parent, the Jewish partner in an interfaith marriage, it was important to give her child and herself a Jewish connection. In these instances, parents indicated that their attachment to the school was related to the ways in which they constructed their own identities as adults. To this extent, the school offered them and their children, what Carol Merz and Gail Furman, following Ferdinand Tönnies, call communities of kinship, neighborhood and mind. The school fits with who they are.²³

Some of those who spoke went even further in describing the significance of the school to their lives, and the personal depth of the discussion may have made the session's mood so emotionally charged. One parent said joining the school was "a kind of coming home." Another said it was "a second chance" after having had such a miserable experience with Jewish education "the first time"—that is, when he went to school as a child. For this parent, involvement at DJDS was a way of "reconnecting to [his] Jewish roots," and it was why he became active in the school even before his children were of school age. When one parent, commenting on the school's importance, said, "I'm not sure if it's about what my child gets or what I get," he spoke for many.

In this sort of setting, where people were asked to offer a public recitation of their commitments to the school, it was difficult to determine what it was that parents "get" from the school, although the intimacy and intensity of this event testifies to the school's appeal for some people. At the very least, however, the general impression left by what parents had to say establishes an interpretative context which can serve as a backdrop for an analysis of school life. This vignette establishes themes of identity, community and adult personal investment which, as I will suggest in the final section, carry surprising implications for how we think about Jewish day schools.

Vignette 3: Reassessing Bible stories

Before considering some of these larger implications, the following vignette extracted from a conversation with Janet Steinberg,²⁴ the school's founding principal, offers a more nuanced sense of what

parents “get” from the school. Janet served as principal at DJDS for the school’s first three years while continuing to act as principal of a local part-time Hebrew school which she had founded more than 20 years previously. She was deeply committed to the success of DJDS and the development of the downtown Jewish community, but her involvement was something of an emergency measure to help get the school started.

More than a year after stepping down as principal, Janet provided a measured consideration of the school’s special characteristics. I turned to her towards the end of the pilot study to seek her perspective on many features of the school’s development and also to test some of my own provisional conclusions about what I had observed.

In the following excerpt from our conversation, Janet offers her view of the school’s influence on parents’ lives.

1. J: I think there were parents who came into the school having some negative
2. feelings about Judaism. They felt that it was superstitious; that it was
3. childish; that it lacked sophistication in terms of theology and philosophy,
4. and I think that that changed. I think in certain circumstances that changed.
5. The whole concept of metaphor. Parents didn’t understand the concept of
6. God and metaphor. So I think that it changed some people who started out
7. thinking that they were secular Jews.
8. A: What was it about the school that changed them? Was it the kinds of
9. experiences they saw their kids having or was it..?
10. J: It was their own involvement.
11. A: The conversations they had as adults?
12. J: It was their own involvement. And sometimes it was an experience that
13. their child had that would start the involvement. Concerned that; about a
14. Bible story the child had brought home, and having all these sorts of inner
15. conflicts come out about what their child is learning.
16. A: People would bring those concerns to you?
17. J: Yes. And then...
18. A: I just wonder where they would encounter those theological issues.

19. **J:** Yes, I talked to parents about theology and would also encourage them to
20. join the Religious Policy and Planning Committee, where we talked in
21. depth about it.
22. **A:** Did you find yourself having many conversations with parents?
23. **J:** Yes. And I loved it.
24. **A:** That's interesting. That's not something that I...
25. **J:** They came angry. They came angry. I think from their childhood
26. experiences and just feeling that grown-ups don't—this is not something
27. for grown-ups—and they didn't want their children to get the "*Bubbe*
28. *meises*" that they...

Janet's comments confirm something that is well known: parents bring baggage to their children's schools; a set of emotion-laden assumptions about Judaism and education derived from their own childhoods, and often unchallenged since then. These preconceptions are analogous to the "institutional knowledge" teacher candidates bring to teacher education programs from their own experiences of schooling.²⁵ They constitute a set of deeply embedded and often conservative ideas about teaching, learning and curriculum. What is less well-known, but is suggested by Janet's remarks, is that these long-held ideas can be transformed by encounters between parents and their children's schools even when their children are quite young. In this instance, the parents who came to the principal with theological questions and reassessed their views of themselves as secular Jews were responding to aspects of the curriculum encountered by children who were not more than eight years old.

How and why parents are changed in this way is not clarified by the conversation. (It was something I was searching for between lines 8 and 18.) I had imagined that there was some vicarious influence at work, in which parents reassessed their own ideas in light of their children's experiences. Tantalizingly, Janet points to another transformational dynamic, something she calls (in lines 10 & 12) the parents' "own involvement." Although, this was a notion I didn't attend to when she first mentioned it, it appears to be a key concept in making sense of the relationships between parents and their children's schools.

Implications

This paper has tried to sketch some causes and consequences of parent's "involvement" in their children's schooling. As these vignettes confirm, parental involvement can mean much more than is indicated by the literature on school-family partnerships which often depicts involvement as a question of how to engender support *from* parents *for* their children's education.²⁶ When viewed in these terms, there is little reason to expect parents to be significantly changed by such a relationship. As Furman has argued, thinking about parental involvement in such utilitarian terms reflects "a sense of the school as quite separate from the community [or family], to the extent that connections have to be built proactively and intentionally".²⁷

I want to suggest that it will be more fertile to think of parental "involvement" in terms closer to a notion of personal investment, in which parents are seen as immersing their selves in their children's schooling, and are in turn shaped by making such as a commitment. From this perspective, the relationship between parents and their children's schools is of a more organic or personalized order. Admittedly, this is not the kind of relationship one sees in many schools and communities, but it is one that is more likely to occur in religious and/or neighborhood schools where there is a greater degree of, what Coleman calls, "intergenerational closure" than in the public education system.²⁸

Intergenerational closure is exhibited by communities where children live and learn in networks closely integrated with the social, economic, geographic, and religious networks in which their parents lead their lives. Schools in these contexts are embedded in the same "functional communities" of kinship, residence, church and work as those occupied by parents, and they sustain a rich texture of interpersonal relations which can be of great benefit in making available to children the "social capital" of the surrounding community.²⁹ At DJDS, there is a high degree of intergenerational closure created by the school's downtown neighborhood, its location at a distance from other day schools, its pluralistic religious orientation and its progressive educational vision. This is the context that has drawn parents into the school, where, in turn, the institution has become, for many, a more significant part of their lives than other more conventional arenas for adult involvement. The school, because it is so much integrated into the intellectual and social networks of parents' lives, that is, because it exhibits intergenerational closure, is an accessible source for their own learning and for the development of their own identities. DJDS may be an elementary school, but it offers adults "a second chance" Jewishly and educationally. It serves as a haven for adults as much as for children.

There may also be another dimension to the parents' investment in the school. This is not so much concerned with what the school *is* but with what parents hope it will *become*. As intimated earlier, a vein of utopianism runs through the way many parents talk about the school; they frequently speak as if the school possesses unlimited potential, sometimes with complete disregard for mundane factors such as staff turnover and budgetary constraints. Perhaps this is typical of how people imagine newly launched schools, where there seem to be few limitations on what they promise. But it may also indicate something more; that at DJDS, an institution which was explicitly founded as an "alternative" day school, many parents have developed a sense of, what Turner calls, *communitas*—"a special feeling of connectedness and potentiality that arises when the structures and hierarchies of everyday life are temporarily suspended".³⁰

For Turner, *communitas* is a liminal condition, characteristic of utopian projects; it exists in a "kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments, of societal change".³¹ In his terms, *communitas* is usually a temporary state which calls for and provides a deep sense of investment and a heightened sense of belonging, much like that we have seen in the behaviors and talk of DJDS parents who have invested themselves in a model of Jewish education and community which differs significantly from the local norm. *Communitas*, Turner argues, occurs at instants of pure potentiality and of cultural creativity,³² like those associated with the early years of a newly created school. It is accompanied by a removal of boundaries between members of the group (as, in this instance, between parents, children and teachers) as they become submerged in a charismatic moment, creating through their investments an alternative way of being.³³

These are conceptual terms that help make sense of the powerful role of DJDS, as an alternative Jewish day school, in the lives of its students' parents. It may, however, be worth considering whether day schools in general, new and old, alternative and mainstream (because of the deep and sustained commitments they demand from parents, and because of their departure from the norms that have long governed how Jews think about their place in North America) can also be understood as aspiring to cultivate a state of *cummunitas* in children and their families. Indeed, it may be more interesting to think about the day school project in general as a utopian endeavor, with all the positive and negative connotations this carries. At the very least, we will not, then, limit ourselves to thinking about these schools only in terms of what they offer children.

NOTES

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⁵ Condliffe-Lagemann, E. "For the Record: Parents a New Key Word in Education." *Teachers College Record*, 94(4), 1993, 677-681.

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⁷ Danielewicz, J. *Teaching Selves: Identity, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001). Jenkins, R. *Social Identity*. (London: Routledge, 1996).

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¹² McLaren, P. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). Sarason, S. *Revisiting "The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change"*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996). Sergiovanni, T. *Building Community in Schools*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

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- ¹⁴ Sarna, J. "American Jewish Education in Historical Perspective." *Journal of Jewish Education*, 64(1&2), 1998, 8-21.
- ¹⁵ Peshkin, A. *Permissible Advantage? The Moral Consequences of Elite Schooling*. (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2001).
- ¹⁶ Peshkin, A. (1986). *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 13-14.
- ¹⁷ Spindler, G. *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling: Anthropological Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).
- ¹⁸ PEJE Resources for day schools. Retrieved September 24, 2004, from <http://www.peje.org/resources.htm>
- ¹⁹ Board subcommittees include subsidy, fundraising, finance, human resources, education and religious policy, marketing and recruitment, planning, board development, security/health & safety, events, and partnership with JCC. Parent Association committees include book fair, adult education, lunch clubs, *challah*, pizza, *oneg Shabbat*, holiday celebrations, new parent buddies, picnic, staff appreciation and art cards.
- ²⁰ Turner, V. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Actions in Human Society*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974). Reimer, J. *Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made it Work*. (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1997).
- ²¹ Turner, *op cit*, 38.
- ²² *Ibid*, 39.
- ²³ Merz, C., & Furman, G. *Community and Schools: Promise and Paradox*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 14, 1997). Tönnies, F. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. (New York: Harper, 1963).
- ²⁴ This is a pseudonym.
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²⁹ Coleman, J. S. "Families and Schools." *Educational Researcher*, 16(6), 1987, 32-38.

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³² *Ibid*, 44.

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