Changing the Landscape: Pluralist Jewish Education in the UK

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Introduction

The ways in which the Jewish community in the UK has met the challenge of living in a pluralist society, as well as within a pluralist Jewish community, are addressed in this chapter as the changing pattern of Jewish education is explored. The development of a Jewish schooling system in the UK has reflected social, political and historical situations spanning five centuries. These developments have occurred in response to shifting perspectives within the main religious denominations in the mainstream Jewish community, as well as in response to educational, cultural and demographic changes in the UK in general, all of which impacted in different ways on Jewish schooling. Defining pluralism in the context of Jewish schools is complex and this chapter looks at what pluralism means both within a school and in the school's relationship with the wider community. In this paper the terms cross-communal and community are used in addition to the term pluralist, both by the institutions themselves in their self definition and by authors of explorations of pluralism in practice.

The Jewish community in the UK

In order to understand the development of pluralist Jewish schools and schooling in the UK, it is important to understand the development and growth of the strands of the UK Jewish community over time.

The first record of Jews living in the UK comes from more than a thousand years ago. But by the end of the 13th century the Jews were banished from Britain, to be reinstated more than 300 years later in 1656 by Oliver Cromwell, then Lord Protector of England (Fletcher-Jones, 1990). The first Jews to settle in the UK were Spanish and Portuguese Jews. From the 1880s until the beginning of the First World War in 1914, mass immigration of Jews, primarily from Eastern Europe, in response to officially inspired persecution led to the Jewish population of the UK rising by some 100,000, to approximately 250,000 by 1919. These Ashkenazi Jews soon outnumbered the local Sephardic population. A further 100,000 immigrants fleeing Nazi Europe entered Britain in the 1930s, and the highest point of population came in the 1950s when there were estimated to be 450,000 Jews living in the UK. The number is now estimated at approximately 285,000, out of a total UK population of just over 61,000,000 (2001 Census).

Historically, synagogue communities in the UK practiced a traditional form of Judaism. Dissatisfaction from some members of both the Sephardim and Ashkenazim led to the opening in1842 of the first Reform synagogue and 60 years later to the founding of the Liberal Movement in 1902 (Fletcher-Jones, 1990). A Masorti (Conservative) Movement began in the UK in the 1960s. Whilst the Conservative Movement is one of the largest single Jewish groupings in North America (second only to Reform), it has grown slowly in the UK, but is still very small.

The UK Jewish population has a particularly strong rate of affiliation, with more than 70% of British Jews formally belonging

to a synagogue. The influence and infrastructure of the Orthodox movements has remained strong throughout, and even with the development of other synagogue movements, the current picture shows that the central Orthodox synagogues, which include the United Synagogues, the Federation of Synagogues (Ashkenazi) and the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogues (Sephardic), represent more than 60% of affiliated Jews in the UK. The Reform and Liberal Jews account for 27%, the Conservatives for just 2%, and the strictly orthodox (*Haredi*) Synagogues, which is the fastest growing single Jewish sector in the UK, account for 11% (Jewish Policy Research, 2000). This does not mean to say that more than 70% of affiliated Jews in the UK follow an orthodox lifestyle. For example, only a minority of the members of the central Orthodox movements practice an Orthodox lifestyle.

Jewish education in the UK – a brief historical perspective

Jewish day school education has been established in the UK since the re-admission of the Jews in the 17th century (Romain, 1985). The Church of England was also active in promoting schools, but because the basic assumptions of Anglican Christianity were taught in these schools, non-conformists, Catholics and Jews were effectively excluded and these minority groups began to provide schools for their own populations (Black, 1998). By 1850, Jewish schools had opened in all areas of the country in which the Jewish population was living. Their continuation was assured when, in 1853, the Manchester Jews School received state funding, putting the Jewish schools on an equal basis, for the first time, with other denominational schools. State funding for denominational schools in the UK has continued to the present day, making a Jewish education economically possible for all who want it (Miller, 2001). A voluntary

fee is payable by parents for the Jewish education elements of the school, including staffing, curriculum and resources, which are not financially supported by the government.

The 1870 Education Act, which paved the way for free and compulsory education in Britain, raised two important questions within the Jewish community. Would suitable provision be made for the religious education of Jewish children in the new schools, and would there be sufficient safeguard against Christian influences? The solution that was reached was that parents would be free to withdraw their children from religious education periods, a situation that remains today. These new schools, known as Board schools, were widely supported by the Jewish population, and by 1911 fewer than 25% of Jewish children attended Jewish schools.

The demise of the Jewish schools owed as much to sociological considerations as anything else. As early as 1911, the reverend S. Levy told the Conference of Anglo Jewish Ministers that the national system of compulsory and free education was enabling Jews to "acquire English habits of thought and character" (Lipman, 1954, p. 144). Whilst integration with the host community was encouraged in the first decades of the 20th century, neither the immigrant families nor the Jewish leaders encouraged assimilation. A fully developed system of Jewish education supplemented the secular studies taught to an increasing majority of children in the non-denominational schools. This supplementary education took place in classes attached to synagogues.

By the end of the Second World War and into the 1950s, education was of prime importance to the post-war generation as it was perceived to be the best means of escaping from a lower economic class into the professional and/or business world. But, an additional means of ensuring that escape emerged: to be as assimilated as necessary in order to be able to take advantage of all that was on offer. Jewish supplementary education competed with music and ballet,

swimming and karate lessons as well as television and other leisure pursuits. Assimilation became more prevalent than integration for many, and Judaism increasingly became something that happened at home. The supplementary schools provided a Jewish education that had decreasing connection to the lives that their pupils were living outside of their synagogue classes.

In the 1960s Jewish day school education was preferred only by the strictly Orthodox community, and also those whose children did not or could not aspire to a Grammar school education (Mendelsson, 2011). Then in 1971, the then Chief Rabbi, Jakobovits, later Lord Jacobovits, launched the Jewish Educational Trust (Sacks, 1994), which significantly raised the profile of Jewish Education within the Jewish community. Communal efforts at fund-raising began to place more efforts on projects within Jewish education. Then in 1994, Chief Rabbi Sacks wrote a powerful study of Jewish continuity (Sacks, 1994). Seriously concerned for the fate of Anglo Jewry, Sacks issued a summons to collective action to counteract the prevailing trend of assimilation and to build on Jacobovits' pleas a generation earlier. Jewish education had become secondary to achievement in secular life at every level. Cultural pluralism had a double effect on Jewish life. It enabled Jewish people to live freely as committed Jews, but also allowed them to lose all or most aspects of Jewishness and become deculturated (Schiff, 1960). Sacks berated the community for its lack of a coherent strategy for Jewish education. The response to his words, together with a growing acknowledgement that the supplementary Synagogue classes have by and large failed to provide a good basic education in Jewish skills, knowledge and practice, led to a change of attitude and direction.

Not all parents, however, choose Jewish schools for their children because they want a vibrant and strong Jewish education. Jewish schools are seen as a positive alternative to the private sector and an alternative to local schools at both primary (elementary) and

secondary (high) school levels. There is also no doubt that at the secondary level, the demise of the academically selective State funded schools and the development of a comprehensive system in the 1970s influenced parents. An element of parental rejection of multicultural education has led to a preference for some for their children to study with other middle class Jewish children. Added to these arguments is the perception, borne out by annually published league tables, that academically, faith-based schools excel far beyond their secular equivalents.

It can be seen therefore that Jewish schools and Jewish schooling demonstrate a reaction to the surrounding culture and society. Zeldin observes example after example in which Jewish schools follow trends in wider society (Zeldin, 1983). In addition, and specific to the UK, the system of State-funded faith schools was expanded by the government in the 1990s and 2000s. Whilst this has now slowed down, this attitude enabled new Jewish schools to be opened and today some 60% of Jewish children enrol in Jewish day schools (Jewish Leadership Council 2008). It should be noted that this percentage is demographically biased, with the majority of schools being in the greater London area and in Manchester. This means that many Jewish families in the UK do not have the possibility of enrolling in a Jewish day school because they do not live in close enough proximity to one. Almost half of the 60% of attendees in Jewish day schools come from the strictly Orthodox community, where there is a 100% take-up of Jewish day school places.

A single system

Until 1981, every Jewish school in the UK operated under the auspices of the Orthodox movements. As can be seen in the preceding pages, the Orthodox movements dominated the UK Jewish landscape historically and numerically. It was the Orthodox Chief Rabbi in 1971 and then again in 1994 who led the call for intensification of

Jewish life and continuity through education, and the philanthropists who were prepared to support Jewish schools financially have been by and large connected to the Orthodox community.

Whilst the strictly Orthodox schools continued to grow and had a homogeneous intake of pupils who came from Orthodox, observant lifestyles, the mainstream Orthodox schools attracted a broad range of pupils from across the religious spectrum. Providing a child was born of a Jewish mother recognized as Jewish by the Chief Rabbi, families were welcome to apply to any of the Jewish schools. Indeed, the schools have recognized that they have needed a broad range of applicants in order to fill all available spaces. They know that they will not fill their places if they restrict entrance to Orthodox practising families, or even those only belonging to Orthodox synagogues. And in practice, the outcome has been that the mainstream Jewish schools in the UK have become pluralist in one sense – and that is in the make-up of both their pupil and staff bodies. They advertise themselves as community schools, and in terms of their pupil intake indeed they have been. The pluralism, however, does not extend to the curriculum, either formal or informal, which at these Orthodox schools follows an Orthodox Jewish studies curriculum. One might argue that as Orthodox schools, they have been perfectly entitled to follow a curriculum that best suits their ethos. They cannot, however, be called pluralist or community schools in respect of their formal or informal curricula.

A new type of Jewish school

The Reform and Liberal Synagogues were not in a financial position to support schools of their own, and more important did not philosophically feel that denominational education was to be recommended or promoted. These synagogue movements felt strongly that their members should play their full part in British society and life. Jewish day schools, in their minds, segregated children and

prevented them from contributing to their local community as well as to the world around them. All hints of segregation were abhorred (Romain, 1991). In the 1970s, however, a decade after the Orthodox community, there grew a realization that the supplementary school system of two or three hours of Jewish education each week was incapable of instilling sufficient depth or quality of Jewish knowledge. This may have been enough when classes took place three or four times a week and received strong parental reinforcement from home, but was inadequate preparation for knowledgeable young people with a strong Jewish identity. Spearheaded by Rabbi Dow Marmur, who made a proposal to the Reform Synagogues Conference in 1972 proposing that the Movement adopt a policy of founding its own day schools, a group was set up to create a Reform Jewish day school. Akiva School opened in 1981, with fewer than 20 pupils, age 4 to 6. Today it is a thriving primary school, catering for more than 400 4-11 year olds.

Akiva school until very recently has also made no claims of pluralism. The school grew out of the British Reform Movement and strongly espoused Reform values and practice. It was not until some 18 years after it opened that it had to question its ethos as two further school projects were developed which did not come from the Orthodox Movements. These state-funded Jewish primary schools were developed in response to a growing feeling amongst some Jews in the London area that the current Jewish day school provision was not broad enough or pluralist enough to suit their needs. Today, both are over-subscribed, open environments in which pluralist Jewish values are in full evidence, espousing these values through the formal and informal curricula.

Possibly the most challenging pluralist project of the UK Jewish community, however, is the creation of a cross communal Jewish secondary school. JCoSS began its story in 2001 when the UK Jewish Community Day School Advisory Board (the umbrella

body supporting the development of schools outside the Orthodox framework) began investigating the possibility of creating a new State-funded Jewish Secondary school, one where children whose families affiliate to one or none of the full range of Synagogue movements would not only be welcomed, but would also be reflected in the Jewish education provided. The school would focus on excellence, not only in curriculum, but in all the facilities it would provide and the opportunities it would offer.

The feasibility study (Miller, 2001), sent to 4,000 families, generated an overwhelmingly positive response and a steering group was set up to take the project forward. Nine years later, after overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges which faced the project from the UK government, the local municipalities, as well as from some within the established Orthodox community, a State-funded Jewish cross communal secondary school opened in 2010 with its first cohort of 180 eleven year olds. For the first time in the UK, children who attended a pluralist primary school were able to move on to a secondary school following a similar ethos. For the first time in the UK, a cross communal secondary school took its place alongside the Orthodox secondary schools that have been in existence for, in some cases, hundreds of years.

In 1999, of the approximately 23,000 children aged 4 to 18 attending Jewish day schools in the UK, a mere 150 attended the one Reform Jewish day school (Carlowe et al., 2003). In 2015, out of approximately 27,000 children who will be attending Jewish day schools (Jewish Leadership Countil, 2008), an estimated 2,500 will be in cross communal, pluralist Jewish day schools. Of the total, although the majority will still attend single stream (Orthodox) schools, a significant minority will have an education undreamed of until recent years.

A question of course is "why now?" and to answer that, one must look at the wider Jewish community in the UK. Until the 1980s,

Jewish religious, cultural and educational life in the UK was relatively denominationally separatist. Limmud, which began as a five day, pluralist, cross communal residential festival of Jewish learning in 1980 with 80 participants, has grown to become an organisation with two annual residential conferences and many single day events in the UK, attracting approximately 7,000 participants in 2008 (Limmud, 2009). Limmud has moved increasingly from the edge towards the center of Jewish events in the UK, and it has been significant in paving the way for other cross communal, pluralist initiatives, including the London Jewish Cultural Centre, Jewish Book Week, Jewish Film Festival, and the new and developing Jewish Community Centre (JCC). Limmud has also given individuals the experience of the possibilities of pluralist Judaism. Limmud was certainly one of the catalysts that made the creation of JCoSS a possibility, and JCoSS's pluralist approach to Judaism in practice is very much influenced by Limmud.

Pluralism in practice

Pluralism is a complex idea. As Chief Rabbi Sacks writes, it designates not a solution, but a range of problems (Sacks, 1995). Sacks was focusing on the relationship between Jews and the wider society in the UK and suggested that while it is a compelling idea it is not a simple one. He spoke of a "community of communities" (1995, p. 117). I suggest that a similar view can be taken to explore the concept of pluralism within Judaism. Pluralism is an approach to diversity – and the differences between people, ideas, beliefs and practices that sees the existence of and the encounter between people with these differences as positive and necessary, both for the intellectual and spiritual advancement of the individuals involved and for the unfolding creation and repair of a community, society and the world. Within this definition, pluralism will exist within boundaries defined by a particular community or society (Robinson, 2009).

The common features that make a school a pluralist school are that it will not only accept all types of Jewish children as students, but that it will also cater for all those children in the ethos, the formal and informal curricula of the school. Pluralist schools are not a new concept in the Anglo Jewish world and many community Jewish day schools exist in America, Canada and Australia. Shevitz (2007) names and describes three levels of pluralism to which community schools subscribe.

First, demographic pluralism, which is the most limited. Whilst such schools accept all Jews and will create conditions that most families will feel comfortable with, they do not teach or pay attention to a variety of Jewish perspectives or practices. Many of the mainstream Orthodox schools in the UK could be called demographically pluralist, as was shown earlier.

Second, Shevitz identifies coexistence pluralism, whereby diversity is accepted and taught within the educational curriculum. These schools seek demographic diversity and promote respect for each other and different ideologies. The current UK pluralist primary schools fall into this category.

Third, Shevitz identifies generative pluralism, which incorporates both demographic and coexistent pluralism and attempts to tackle the different and contradictory perspectives through discussion, question and argument. Students are encouraged to articulate their own ideas and this can lead to new individual and communal understandings. The JCoSS secondary school aims to meet this challenge.

A pluralist school should be explicit about its core pillars of Jewish identity with which it expects students to engage. These core pillars are broadly defined norms of practice and belief within which there is room for a widely differentiated range of expressed commitments. The idea of core pillars of Jewish identity implies that while educational success in a pluralistic school will include a wide range of student choices regarding *how* certain communal norms

will play out in their lives, *whether* these norms should play a role in their lives is not up for debate.

The pluralist Jewish schools in the UK teach from each of the mainstream Jewish perspectives: Orthodox, Masorti, Reform, Liberal, and Secular Judaism. Students are expected to enter into the conversation and to show serious engagement with Judaism in any of its forms. A focus is to help to shape the unique Jewish identity of all graduates of the school, encouraging them to engage with a full range of Jewish options.

Jewish schools within a pluralist society

As noted earlier, a further challenge in the UK Jewish community is the relationship between Jews and the wider society in Britain. In the 1950s and 60s, Britain gradually transformed from a basically monolithic society to a multicultural, multi-faith society. New commonwealth immigrants had arrived in the UK in growing numbers in the 1950s and 60s, but multiculturalism was only adopted as a general policy and as an educational objective in the late 1970s (Mendelsson, 2011). Attitudes to Jewish day school education in general reflected these trends in wider society as we have seen above, but they also affected attitudes to the taught curriculum.

The DCSF (2007) identify four main dimensions of community, namely:

- The school community – the children and young people it serves, their parents, carers and families, school staff and governors, and the community users of the school's facilities and service.
- The community within which the school is located – this applies not only to the immediate geographical neighbors but also to the city or local authority area within which the school is located.
- The UK community – all schools are, by definition, part of this community.

- The global community formed by European Union and international links.

The Jewish studies curriculum provides ample opportunities for community engagement through the central theme running through Jewish teaching of charity, justice and helping others. Jewish schools are increasingly aware of the role they must play to ensure that they engage with the wider, pluralist community. The first school outside the mainstream Orthodox movements, Akiva primary school, was also the first Jewish school in the UK to teach world religions as part of its regular curriculum. From the earliest days of the school, children learnt about other religions, visited places of worship of their Sikh and Hindu neighbors, and exchanged visits and lessons with children at the nearby Catholic school. All denominational state schools in the UK now have to show evidence of the ways in which they relate to the wider society around them.

In faith schools, compliance with the duty towards community cohesion is inspected by the denominational inspectorate. In the case of the Jewish schools, this falls to Pikuach, set up in 1996 in response to the government requirement that schools have their denominational religious education inspected using a uniform framework that parallels Ofsted, the national framework for inspecting all State schools (Miller, 2007). Inspectors have to judge to what extent the school exhibits community cohesion by taking full part in a pluralist society, within a context of self evaluation against their own agreed criteria. There is much room for interpretation and so a Jewish school that teaches Hinduism through a project on "light", during which half an hour (or less) is spent learning about Diwali, may still receive a good grade for inspection, depending on the school's own aims and ethos (Miller, 2011).

In 2006, the British government and the providers of state-funded schools with a religious character came together to "share

understanding of the contribution of faith schools to school-based education and to society in England" (DfES 2006). The initiative highlighted "the very positive contribution" which schools with a religious character make as valuable, engaged partners in the school system and in their pluralist local communities and beyond.

Parker-Jenkins (2009) researched five Muslim and four Jewish schools in the UK to explore the experiences of pluralism and estrangement/alienation with the wider community. Her findings show the diverse approaches used in maintaining a religious focus in the curriculum, and how these overlap with efforts to engage with the wider community at local, regional, national and international levels. While she found that some parents expressed interest in having more inter-faith engagement, the senior management teams in schools expressed concerns over trying to increase levels of community engagement, since they felt that some parents had deliberately chosen the school so that their children did not have to mix with others.

Parker-Jenkins suggests that community "engagement" is a more likely goal for faith schools than "cohesion". She suggests that it is unclear what to cohere around, and whose values should underpin cohesion. Her research has resulted in a guide for schools as they grapple with the issues of relating to the world around them. Based on Gaine (2005) and Booth and Ainscow (2002), her typology ranges from meaningful engagement and significant interaction through sustained and on-going projects at one end, to no engagement at the other.

Jewish schools in the UK play their part in a pluralist society by engaging the wider community at various levels of intensity. In the current political climate, there is no possibility for State schools of any kind in Britain to have no contact with others within and beyond the school community. Even those Jewish schools who feel strongly that they want to have as little as possible to do with the

pluralist community around them show some weak engagement with people beyond the school gates. Conversely, very few Jewish schools exhibit "significant interaction", although this may be more about having insufficient time and resources than a lack of interest or desire. Engagement with pluralist society is only one of a multitude of aspects of school life to integrate into the values and practice of a school.

The future: some challenges

One of the increasingly key challenges for Jewish schools in the UK is how to comfortably accommodate and become a pluralist community of schools. In other words, the task is for the mainstream Orthodox schools and the pluralist schools to accept each other as equal and valid expressions of Judaism and Jewish education. Each of the pluralist schools in the UK has developed its own culture of pluralism which can be seen to be related to the community in which each is embedded. With a pluralist secondary school joining the three pluralist primary schools, the family of pluralist schools is growing. Whilst they are still catering for a minority of the total number of Jewish students, the reality is that the families to which these schools cater are, by and large, amongst the same families attending the mainstream schools.

A further challenge is with making pluralism work in practice. One might say that in a pluralist school all expressions of Jewish theology and ritual are valid, but in reality no school starts from a neutral starting point. In the UK, all the pluralist schools have started from a non-Orthodox perspective and their default position is to provide equal opportunities for boys and girls. They also have school open on the second day of the *shalosh regalim* (festivals of Succot, Pesach and Shavuot) for those pupils who want to be at school on those days. Some of the pluralist schools in North America start from an Orthodox perspective and their ethos reflects

this. All pluralist schools, however, want to be as welcoming as possible to families across the Jewish spectrum, and whatever their starting point, make strenuous efforts to address this through their ethos. JCoSS, for example, knows that a strictly kosher kitchen and dining room supervised by a rabbinic authority will only matter to a small proportion of its pupils, but for those families this is highly important, and so rabbinical certification has been sought. The needs of a diverse constituency of students and their families must be balanced with the desire to create a cohesive student body.

A challenge within the school day, for example, is with *tefillah* (prayer). How does a pluralist school cope with the daily compulsory act of worship which every state religious and non-religious school in the UK has to provide? Challenges are less about the actual provision of different prayer streams (Orthodox, Reform, etc.) and more about organization: how do pupils choose which to attend? Can they attend an Orthodox service on a Monday and a Liberal service on a Tuesday? Could a JCoSS pupil spend seven years at school and only attend services in one stream? What are the learning opportunities? These questions are not yet satisfactorily answered, and whilst looking at models of pluralist schooling from overseas, we can see that no school has a model of excellence that addresses all the needs of JCoSS.

Conclusion

Three perspectives of pluralism characterize Jewish schooling in the UK: a pluralist intake of pupils, a pluralist Jewish Studies curriculum, and a pluralist engagement with the wider community; all within the historical and sociological context of Jewish life in Britain. One of the impetuses for the creation of pluralist Jewish schools in the UK was the refusal of the Orthodox schools to allow entry to children who did not meet the Chief Rabbi's status requirements. Additional challenges have been recently faced by all mainstream

Jewish schools, which have had to change their admissions criteria to comply with the UK Supreme Court ruling, made in 2009, that now makes it unlawful for Jewish schools to give priority to children who are born Jewish. In practice, admission to Jewish schools is now seen as a matter of faith and not one of ethnicity. To gain entry to a Jewish school, families now have to show evidence of adherence to the faith (Synagogue attendance for example) and not merely birth. This brings Jewish schools' entry requirements in line with other faiths, and is problematic for a religion where attending synagogue is not our test of "Jewishness". It also, ironically, makes one of the reasons for developing JCoSS no longer relevant.

The Jewish community, and in particular the Jewish schooling community in the UK, has reflected the social, political and economic developments in the UK. The Jewish community has had to meet the challenges of living both in a pluralist society in Britain, as well as in an increasingly pluralist Jewish community. Whilst religious separation has been shown to have increased within UK society in general, and historically within the strands of Anglo Jewry, important initiatives, for example Limmud, have paved the way for a climate of increasing pluralism. It is within this climate that pluralist Jewish schooling is situated.

The significant opportunity of pluralist schools must be in the developing understanding of "the Other", both within the different strands and practices of Judaism and in their engagement with the wider community. We know from the development of cross communal organizations in the UK that it is possible to overcome the challenges of living and working together. Pluralist schools will play their part towards that goal.

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