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### Culture and Character Education in a Jewish Day School: A Case Study of Life and Experience

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## **Culture and Character Education in a Jewish Day School: A Case Study of Life and Experience**

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*This article addresses how to teach character comprehensively by studying ways a school's concurrent curricula (the official curriculum, the operational curriculum, the extra curriculum, and the hidden curriculum) can be used to teach character to students. A single case study analyzes the curriculum at a Jewish day school by examining school documents and records, observing classroom instruction and school culture, and interviewing school administrators and teachers. This research concludes that the Jewish day school teaches character comprehensively through a religious foundation—from which the entire curriculum evolves. The study indicates that addressing character education through religious studies, school traditions, and school culture will enable both public and private schools to fully integrate character education into the school program.*

Character training has been a major aim of education for centuries (Berkowitz, 2011; Doyle, 1997; McClellan, 1999). Early American scholar Noah Webster (1980 [1828]) included character in his definition of education, noting that instruction and discipline are not only intended for the development of understanding, but also for “correcting the temper and form[ing] the manners and habits of youth” (p. 69). Instilling manners and habits was still emphasized nearly a century and a half later, when civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (1947), wrote: “The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals . . . We must remember that intelligence is

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not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education” (p. 1). People no longer question *if* character should be taught (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008; Noddings, 1997). Instead, the question is *how* character should be taught in the daily school setting (Bennett, 2001; Good, 2002; Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011; Paige, 2002).

Studies suggest effective character education should not be an individual course or program, but should be taught comprehensively—through all courses, methods, electives, and activities (Bennett, 2001; DeRoche & Williams, 2001; Doyle, 1997; Lickona, 1997; Etzioni, 1998; Good, 2002; Lickona, 1992; Wynne & Ryan, 1993):

Insofar as character lessons are grafted onto the course load, and have no meaningful connection to the core curriculum, they make ethical concerns appear artificial—something reserved for particular occasions, rather than part of the warp and woof of everyday life. (Bennett, 2001, p. 1)

This study examined a Jewish day school to illustrate how character training from a private, religious perspective can be transferred to both private and public schools, keeping in mind that schools can learn from each other (Rothstein, Carnoy, & Benveniste, 1999).

## JEWISH DAY SCHOOL EDUCATION

The integration of character instruction and values into the curricular program is a common goal of contemporary Jewish day schools (Bolensky, 2002; Peerless, 2002). Literature and research on Jewish day schools shows Jewish moral curriculum teaches character through the integration of Jewish tradition and secular academics (Efron, 1994). Academic knowledge is deemed valuable only when it leads to right behavior (i.e., the fulfillment of the commandments). A famous story in the Talmud tells of a pagan who came to Rabbi Hillel and asked him to teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary . . . go and learn it” (*Talmud* [1959], Shabbath 31a, p. 140).

According to the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (2002), day schools explicitly teach values, such as *kevod* (respect), *tzedakah* (the imperative to share with others), and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). Already grounded in Jewish texts, these values are usually linked to hands-on projects: visiting nursing homes, canned food drives, writing letters to elected representatives, etc. (Diamant & Kushner, 2002 [2000], p. 7)

## OVERVIEW OF METHOD

### Statement of the Problem

This study analyzed how a private, religious school teaches character—an issue in character education that previously had little in-depth research. The purpose of this study was to describe how the concurrent curricula (including the written curriculum, taught curriculum, and school culture) at a Jewish day school teach character to its students.

### Research Design

The research design was a qualitative case study methodology. A single case study is valid for showing how a particular concept or event is implemented (Creswell, 1998) and is used to emphasize in-depth inquiry and setting, the perspectives of the participants, and a comprehensive view of the school (Gay & Airasian, 2000). The outcome of the single case study is concerned, essentially, with generalizability to theory and transferability to schools with similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This study included a holistic investigation of the school curriculum through the analysis of school documents, records, interviews, observations, and artifacts (Creswell, 1998). Once the data was collected and the case description emerged, themes were analyzed and interpreted. From the case study analysis, generalizations were then constructed.

In order to triangulate (Creswell, 1998) and assure research validity, the researcher used several methods (Yin, 1994; 2003). A formal analysis was made of the curricula (e.g., written, taught, hidden, extra, etc.) in order to:

examine those parts and the way they fit together to make a whole, to identify the beliefs and ideas to which the developers were committed and which either explicitly or implicitly shaped the curriculum, and to examine the implications of these commitments and beliefs for the quality of the educational experience. (Posner, 2004, p. 14)

The operational curriculum was analyzed through observation (Duke, 1987; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). In addition, the administrator and teachers were interviewed to further understand each of the concurrent curricula (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 1994; 2003).

### Scope of the Study

This study focused on a single case study of one school (Yin, 1994; 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Heritage Academy is a community day school located in a midwest region of the United States. Since its founding, the school has taught both academics and Judaism to elementary school students. The

students and their families represent a range of religious practice including Conservative Jewish, Reform Jewish, and non-affiliated families. For the past 20 years, Heritage has ranged from 40 to 60 students each year. At the time of the study the city had a population of approximately 400,000 people, and a Jewish population of 2,500.

## CASE STUDY

### Core Ethical Values

Research literature suggests that core ethical values should be the basis of good character (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, n.d.). Literature also indicates that a major source of these core ethical values is religion (Colson, 1995; Glanzer, 1999; Haynes & Thomas, 1998). In addition, some authors suggest that character education should examine the impact of teaching character from the context of a religious framework (Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Glanzer, 1999; Haynes & Thomas, 1998). Research also suggests that teaching character outside of a religious context can be “hollow and misleading” (Haynes & Thomas, 1998, p. 15-2). Further research claims that Jewish day schools core values are integrated throughout every aspect of the school curriculum.

The official, operational, extra, and hidden curricula at Heritage Academy teach character through Jewish religious beliefs and traditions. School documents, interviews, and observations reveal that the Torah and the Talmud are foundational to the school’s educational philosophy and character training.

The goal of the school is to promote Tikkun Olam, which means, “repairing the world.” Jews believe that they are partners with God and that our responsibility is to leave the world a better place than it was when we came into it. And so we at many different levels work on repair: teaching the kids how to focus on acts of loving kindness; acts of ecology works very well with elementary-aged kids, acts of caring for the elderly—we seize what opportunities we can. (K.E.R., personal communication, 2003).

As School Director Hightower said, “Everything we say and do comes from our [religious] background” (H.H., personal communication, 2003).

Research advocates that comprehensive character education begins with a school mission that emphasizes character (Jones, 1999). The mission statement of Heritage Academy clearly supports teaching character through Jewish religion and tradition, acknowledging that the school gives students a “spiritual compass of Torah” to help them in life:

Heritage Academy is a Jewish Community Day School that seeks to provide all students with an outstanding education in both general and

Judaic studies. Heritage Academy maintains a supportive yet challenging atmosphere that fosters a lifelong commitment to learning and to the imperative of Tikkun Olam, repairing and caring for the world. (*Parent Handbook*, 2003, p. 8)

Each teacher and administrator interviewed noted that the Jewish concept of “caring for the world” is the main emphasis of the school mission. The Heritage Academy website quotes Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” The handbook (2003) says the school offers a faith-based education in a Jewish atmosphere. “Through observances of traditional celebrations and by learning core Jewish values, our children find they become members of a close-knit family that fosters the best in them and guides them toward future community leadership” (2003, p. 3).

The emphasis on Jewish religion and traditions is carried throughout other aspects of the school curriculum as well. For example, the *Parent Handbook* claims the school’s curriculum is an integration of “general and Judaic studies” (p. 8). An entire page of the handbook is devoted to Judaic philosophy, stressing study of the Torah, *mitzvot* (i.e., commands/good deeds) (Plaut, n.d.; Seltzer, 1982), community, responsibility, service, peace, justice, mercy, and humility—all of which are valued character traits. Discipline policies are based on several Judaic beliefs listed in the handbook: the value of the individual person, the goodness of the individual person, the power of words, the potential for good, the balance of justice and compassion, taking responsibility for one’s actions, etc.

The school observes several Jewish traditions and customs (*Parent Handbook*). These customs include:

1. *Tefillah* services. These prayer services for first through fifth grade students focus on worship, character lessons, and prayer for others. Tefillah services are also held in Judaic Studies once a week with each individual class.
2. *Tzedakah*. The Jewish custom of Tzedakah focuses on a “life-long responsibility” of charity, righteousness and good deeds. Teaching Tzedakah reinforces character education throughout the curriculum by including several Mitzvah projects during the year.
3. Jewish holidays. Major Jewish holidays are observed at Talmud Academy. The study of holidays explains Jewish beliefs, history, and traditions.

Heritage Academy’s educational philosophy promotes individual success and a positive self-image in children (*Parent Handbook*). In addition, the philosophy emphasizes participation in home, school, and community, where children are taught respect for those around them. The school’s educational philosophy also stresses life-values and self-discipline. The ultimate

goal is for students to become “happy, healthy, responsible, and contributing members of society” (*Parent Handbook*, p. 14).

The school offers an integrated education in “general and Judaic studies” (*Parent Handbook*, p. 8), including “the rich, religious, ethical and cultural heritage of Judaism” (p. 14). Director Hightower said the Torah and Judaic values are key to the curriculum’s focus on character: “It’s all Torah-driven” (H.H., personal communication, 2003). The *Parent Handbook* further outlines the Judaic beliefs on which the school’s character training is based:

1. Belief that the study of Torah in its broadest sense provides an understanding of the history and meaning of the Jewish experiences and teaches the basis for Jewish ethics and beliefs. “The study of Torah is equal to all (the other mitzvot) [commandments/good deeds] . . .”
2. Belief that the practice of mitzvot will lead to a joyous and enriched appreciation of Judaism . . .
3. Belief that Jews are part of the worldwide community in which the importance of the state of Israel is critical. Judaism requires a sense of community, with responsibility towards fellow Jews on communal, national and world levels. “All ‘Israel’ (the Jewish people) is responsible one to the other . . .”
4. Belief in the imperative that we must be deeply involved in service for freedom, brotherhood and peace among all peoples. “Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God . . .”
5. Belief that being made in the image of God means we have the ability to do justly. The role of the school is to nurture that growth. “And God said: ‘Let us make man in Our Image, after Our Likeness.’” (*Parent Handbook*, pp. 15–16).

Principles based on Jewish religion and traditions are also reinforced in academic classes and extracurricular activities. Teachers stress Jewish values of character during each day. Jewish traditions and holidays are woven throughout academic subjects. In addition, Jewish values are modeled for the students—teachers not only ask their students to live according to good virtues, but they model these virtues in front of the students. Respect is emphasized in positive reinforcement and in disciplinary actions. Kindness is shown in both group and individual work, as are responsibility and good deeds. For example, Hebrew class teaches character through Hebrew stories and folklore (E.D.H., personal communication, 2003). The course uses lecture, discussion, and hands-on activities, helping students identify with the Jewish community and culture. Teaching students the meaning of many Hebrew words promotes character development (E.D.H., personal communication, 2003). Examples include:

1. *Be’atzmi* (by myself) teaches independence, organization, and neatness.
2. *Bete’avon* (Bon Appetite) teaches sensibility and tolerance to the tastes of others.



3. *Hara'ashan (The Gragger)* teaches interpersonal relationships, the consideration of others, and Purim laws and customs.
4. *B'Yom Ha'atzmaut (Jewish Independence Day)* teaches the importance of Jewish community and heritage.

Heritage Academy's extra curriculum and school culture are immersed in character education through Jewish religion and tradition. Jewish religious services, Student Council, and special events each build character through emphasizing Jewish beliefs, culture, traditions, and caring for the world. Guest speakers remind students how to act and what to be: "to stand tall as a Jew . . . to say things that are pure . . . [to] see good points in someone else and look at the truth."

### Character Comprehensively Defined

Character education research (Lickona, et al., n.d.) suggests the definition of character should include students' thoughts, feelings, and actions—opportunities to practice what is right are highly important (Leming, 1993). Findings of this study showed character education at the Jewish day school goes far beyond indoctrination or class discussion. At the day school, good character includes knowing, being, and doing by teaching values of respect and repairing the world through practical projects (Bolensky, 2002; Diamant & Kushner, 2002 [2000]; Elkin, 2002a).

Students are taught how to think (through discussion of the Talmud and Jewish traditions), to feel (through practicing empathy toward others), and to act (through projects like collecting money for coats for the poor or reading to the elderly) that give to those less fortunate). Through Judaic Studies, school programs, mitzvot, and continuous reinforcement, students are challenged to think according to Jewish principles, to love God, and to do good to others.

### Comprehensive Approach to Character Education

Effective character education must have a comprehensive approach to teaching core values through all phases of school life (Lickona, et al., n.d.; Bennett, 2001; Good, 2002; Paige, 2002). Lickona (1992) says character education should be part of all areas of school life, taught both as a separate course and as a comprehensive program. Literature also claims that a main purpose of Jewish day school education is teaching character through the promotion of Jewish culture (Baeck, 1961; Barclay, 1974 [1959]; Elkin, 2002b). The findings of this study showed the Jewish day school is an excellent example of comprehensive character education. At Heritage Academy, character is modeled by teachers and staff, lived by students, reflected by academic plans and discipline policies, and enhanced by the practice of mitzvot. Heritage



Academy teaches character as a separate course (i.e., Judaic Studies) and as an integrated part of the curriculum. Character education at the Jewish day school is fully integrated throughout the curriculum, not taught as separate, disjointed topics. One example is seen in the first grade classroom.

During first grade reading, *Morah* (teacher) Halstead and an aide spend one-on-one time listening to each child read. Whenever the student completes the reading, the student then gets to push a button on a game that makes sound effects ranging from applause to a rooster crowing. Each time Morah Halstead says “[They] finished their reading!” giving praise for the whole class to hear. Halstead’s kind words bring smiles to each child:

“Kendall, I love how you came in, sat right down, and got to work.”

“John is really reading nicely.”

“I love how everyone is reading quietly.”

“I love it when you’re nice and quiet when everyone is reading...and if you get kind of tired while you’re reading, you can just put your head back [and rest]—it’s Monday, everyone is kind of tired.”

Some praise also includes help and correction:

“That looks nice and neat. If you take your time, you can do your best work, can’t you?”

“I like how hard you are all working—and nice and neat, too...”

At one point, two third graders interrupt class to announce the Student Council’s penny drive. The school is raising money for four projects: playground equipment, the elderly, poor people, and the nursing home. The class that does the best in the first phase wins one of three things: a Blockbuster movie, donuts, or ice cream. One council member smiles and says, “I would choose the Blockbuster movie, because you could watch it during snack.”

Character education is naturally integrated throughout the concurrent curriculum at Heritage Academy. While the official curriculum claims the school integrates character education, direct observations of the operational curriculum confirm teachers are actively teaching character throughout the day. Teachers use Judaic traditions and values, rules, discipline, class discussion, literature, and many other methods to teach students character. Once such example is seen as Morah Rothstein, the kindergarten teacher, admonishes her students after some misbehavior on the playground.

“Because we’ve had such a busy day and we’ve had trouble getting along,” says Morah Rothstein, “We are going to have two groups and we’re going to each build a puzzle. It’s not a race—it’s teamwork. I’m going to see who’s going to work well together. To work as a team, that’s how you’re

going to have to work together. Whenever you're working as a team, what should you do?"

Sarah: "Work as a team."

Judah: "Share."

Mira: "Be good."

Sarah: "Be a good sport."

Mary: "Listen."

Steven: "Can't hit anybody."

Sam: "Don't grab something from somebody."

Matthew: "Don't say, 'Hey, give me that.'"

Mishah: "Can't punch people."

Martha: "Can't smack people in the face."

Jonathan: "Be helpful."

Rothstein: "What is the goal when we're working together as a team?"

Sarah: "We want to finish."

Students are then separated into two teams. One team does a good job working together and finishes their puzzle first. Although the second team has some arguments, they eventually finish. Rothstein awards both teams with stickers before they go home.

Rarely is a class or activity at Heritage in which character is not taught in some way, either directly or indirectly. As students spend time in academic classes, Judaic Studies, Hebrew, Physical Education, recess, lunchtime, and extra-curricular activities, they are taught the importance of character.

It's really like character development every minute around here!... Sometimes when I'm getting ready for church on the weekends I think "Do I need to be going?" Because I've been in church all week... By the end of the week you had your... well, "communion" together. I feel like... I don't know. [Miller] has found the same thing too. [Renner], who's the Judaic Studies teacher, told me she sometimes feels the same way... and she's Jewish... that she was in church all week. This is church because we are living certain values... We don't teach as much as it's a state of being. Do you understand what I'm saying? Because we're always in it. We're not teaching it—we're just in it. (H.H., personal communication, 2003)

### Caring Community and Moral Action

A school promoting character training should also be a caring community (Lickona, et al., n.d.). The Jewish day school reflects this ideal in several ways: through culture, positive peer relationships, outreaches to the nursing home and surrounding community, school traditions, and class projects.

The kids are constantly involved in something that is community-oriented, or giving back to the community, whether it's a penny drive

to raise money for . . . the victims of a hurricane, to the flu drive every year . . . They are very involved in planting trees—and that's all tied into the Jewish belief of giving back to your community. So it is ongoing, there's never a time where they aren't involved with something. They are highly encouraged to be thinking outside of themselves and what can you give to the community. (F.I.M., personal communication, 2003)

When we go on field trips we stress to [to the students] the importance of good behavior and setting an example for other kids. They do some projects, like in years past they have collected dog food and gave it to the shelter for the dogs and cats here in town. They collect food for the needy. (J.K.H., personal communication, 2003)

Students are taught to accept each other and to welcome new students and visitors. In turn, students themselves feel accepted by teachers and peers. This enables students to reach out to those in the nursing home and in the community beyond. The school culture at Heritage Academy is a safe environment for both academic growth and character growth.

Heritage Academy's culture models and nurtures character for the students through teaching mitzvot and Tikkun Olam. The school's emphasis on Jewish tradition, religion, holidays, cooperation, and music creates a strong sense of community and *belonging-ness* that is conducive to building character. The size of the school enables teachers and students to build strong relationships with one another. Several teachers note the school's small size is instrumental in its ability to teach character. They believe students are more able to build relationships across the grade-levels, further creating a safe environment for learning and practicing character among peers. School tradition and community are lived out in a small familial atmosphere where everyone knows everyone, responsibilities are shared, and children feel safe and loved.

The day school offers students multiple opportunities for moral action. Students are not simply told what is right but are asked to discover what is right based on the Talmud. The Jewish day school teaches that mitzvot are expected religious duties critical to the Jewish way of life (*Parent Handbook*, 2003). The Jewish emphasis on mitzvot shows that character is both internal beliefs and external actions. Students are continuously given opportunities to apply moral principles to daily life through conflict resolution, ministry to nursing home residents, and community outreach.

The emphasis on mitzvot is evident in school documents, curriculum guides, and books. Mitzvot are in daily activities like "school buddies" and welcoming the stranger. The importance of good deeds is taught during the Jewish *Teffilah* and *Kabbalat Shabbat* services—weekly services held for students to learn more about Jewish beliefs and traditions. Mitzvot are observed in special programs like student council and numerous outreaches to the neighboring Jewish retirement center and the community.

The comprehensive approach of teaching mitzvot reminds students that Jewish people perform good actions and give to those around them.

Promoting character through mitzvot puts an emphasis not on the individual, but on the community. The notion is to be good by performing good actions. Good deeds are what life is all about: “Judaism is relevant to everyday life. Christians see life as creed, then faith, then deed; Jews see life as deed and then faith (no creed). Christianity is based on the individual—Judaism is based on community” (J.E.D., personal communication, 2003).

Wednesday afternoon before the school’s fall break, the students celebrate Sukkot by gathering in a courtyard outside the retirement center to sing with Morah Rebecca—a friend of Talmud Academy who often comes with her guitar for “sing-a-longs.” Morah Rebecca sits inside a sukkah the students had decorated a few days earlier for the center residents. As they prepare to begin, Rabbi Z— steps in to say “hello” and takes a few moments to talk to the students about the tradition of Sukkot. He holds the palm, willow, and myrtle (the *lulav*) that the children have been learning about in Judaic Studies.

The palm is straight like the spine and reminds me to stand up tall as a Jew—to be proud of who I am. The willow reminds us of the lips . . . say say things that are pure; have a pure mouth. The myrtle reminds us of the eye . . . may I see good points in someone else and look at the truth—not lies.

Children and teachers then relax in the sunshine as Morah Rebecca leads in song. Many sit in the grass around the Sukkot. At one side, younger children play around a birdbath. Nearby, teachers sit holding children in their laps. Toward the back, older girls sit with younger children resting against them. Surrounding the students are a half-dozen elderly people, sitting and listening to the music. The last song is one that has become a favorite of the school’s over the past few weeks, “Kehilah Kedosha” (Nichols, 2003). Everyone sings together:

Each one of us must sing the song. Each one of us must start to hear.  
Each one of us must right the wrong. Each one of us must do the work.  
Each one of us must hold the hope. Each one of us must build the home . . .  
It’s how we help. It’s how we give. It’s how we pray. It’s how we hear.  
It’s how we live. It’s how we help. It’s how we give. It’s how we pray.

## Meaningful and Challenging Curriculum

Research suggests school curriculum must be meaningful and challenging (Lickona, et al., n.d.). Jewish day schools claim to have meaningful, challenging academic programs and test scores show day school students do perform very well academically (Bolensky, 2002). Heritage Academy

promotes its strong academic program through its handbook, brochures, and website. The connection between strong academics and character training is echoed by the teachers.

The values taught in Jewish tradition are naturally connected to what we teach in academics—for example, “doing your best.” We try to directly make connections to Jewish tradition as often as possible. One way is by teaching letters in kindergarten—we teach words dealing with both Jewish tradition and character. (H.A.R., personal communication, 2003)

Findings of this study showed that the day school curriculum offers hands-on projects to make learning real to students. The small school size enables teachers to work individually to ensure each student’s success. In addition, students are challenged to apply classroom learning to real-life issues. Morah Renner applies classroom learning to real-life issues in her Judaic Studies class for fourth and fifth grade students.

The class discusses a scenario from *You Be the Judge* (Grishaver, 2000). The students are clearly focused as Renner summarizes a story about whether a 15-year-old girl should skip *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) to ride in a bike-a-thon. Renner explains that the girl in the story (Randi) is a good kid who enjoys doing mitzvahs. Randi wants her Temple youth group to enter the bike-a-thon to help raise money for a cause. The Temple authority says the Temple will not support such a event because it is held on Shabbat. Randi’s parents also say “No” because “Torah says not to work on Shabbat.” Randi replies, “But the Torah also says to do good works.” The ethical question is, “Can you do ‘work’ on Shabbat if it is for a mitzvah?”

Renner explains,

There are two points of view: 1. Not on Shabbat—remember the first place to look to get an answer is in the Torah. 2. Randi’s point-of-view—we have to help the poor...there are rules in the Torah that say you ‘should be your brother’s keeper.’ God’s answer to Cain is ‘you have to take care of your brother.’

Renner then individually asks each student what he or she thinks (to set the mood, during the discussion Renner addresses each student as “Rabbi”). As students respond, Renner keeps track by writing two columns on the board: “Shabbat” and “Mitzvah.”

John: “To help the poor is more important than Shabbat.”

Samuel: “Maybe it’s not okay to miss Shabbat for a party or something, but helping the poor is important.”

Renner: “Are the poor more important than Shabbat?”

Samuel: “Yeah.”

Renner: “Rabbi David?”

- David: "Some people don't have money for Shabbat."
- Renner: "You're pointing out that some people have nothing. Last week we said it doesn't matter whether you are poor or rich—the Torah still matters..."
- Emily: "I think people should have a choice whether or not they rest on Shabbat."
- Renner: "You're a Reform Jew, aren't you? That's what Reform Jews believe. Shabbat starts tonight at sundown and goes through Saturday. (I like the way you're all listening, by the way)..."
- Susan: "Help the poor because they don't have money."
- Renner: "Rabbi Katherine always goes last because she wants to think about it."
- Katherine: "I don't know."
- Jonathan: "Aren't people more important than traditional things?"
- Renner: "I was wondering if someone would say that. We would say, 'Aren't people more important than rituals?'"
- Katherine: "Do Shabbat—plenty of people are doing the bike-a-thon."
- Samuel: "I think she can miss on Shabbat and God will be okay with that."
- Renner: "Okay, it's time to vote."
- Susan: "I have one. Should do Shabbat, because her family [is] really into Shabbat... you can't do everything."
- Renner: "Can't do every mitzvah in the world. Okay, it's time to vote because I have to give the solution and we're running out of time—Shabbat or poor?" Each student gives his or her vote in one word. The final vote is eight for helping the poor and four for Shabbat.

After the vote, Renner reads the solution from the book:

1. The Torah commands not to work on Shabbat. 2. The Talmud defines work as any of 39 things. The bike-a-thon requires two-or-three of these ways of work: earning money, moving places, and moving beyond the limited amount of space allowed. 3. The Talmud speaks of principle called *pikuach nefesh*—this teaches Shabbat can be broken to save a human life. Who said that—Rabbi Jonathan said 'Aren't people more important than ritual?'... It is better that we break Shabbat [to help Hillel live] in order that he may celebrate many more Shabbats in the future. 4. The *Mishnah* (the Jewish book of commentaries written by rabbis to explain the Talmud) says 'If you think you can save a life by your actions, you must do so even if it is Shabbat.'

What the Talmud is saying is—there are ways to help the poor and keep Shabbat...look for ways to help the homeless and observe Shabbat. Find a way to do it without breaking Shabbat. The action of riding a bike on Shabbat is not going to save a life, so she shouldn't break Shabbat. So, if your action right then can save a life, the rabbis say 'Do it.'

## Collegial Atmosphere

The school staff at Heritage Academy works together to develop character within the students. Findings of this study revealed that the Jewish day school teaches character through a collegial atmosphere, where staff members work together to train each student. Staff members model the core values presented in the school's mission and share the responsibility of training students in character development. The day school staff is united in their vision and methodology for teaching character to students.

There is a lot of camaraderie here and I think these [teachers] would do anything... When [the children] go out to play... they believe that [we're in this together]. You might see the whole crew out there because it's like "our children." It's not, "My teacher said I could do that." There's none of that because the kids know: "This is ours." (H.H., personal communication, 2003)

## Parental Support and Involvement

As suggested by earlier research (Lickona, et al., n.d.), the findings showed that Heritage Academy successfully partners with parents and community members to train the students. This is seen in parent participation in school events and their children's school life. The school culture welcomes and encourages parental involvement during weekly services and several special events. Likewise, parents readily participate in these events—and this participation builds strong relationships between parents and school.

Mothers and fathers—fathers who are lawyers, going off to demanding jobs—come and they walk their child to class and hand them over to the teacher. And [teachers] are so respectful to the parents and I think the parents love the atmosphere. I had one father say to me, "I feel like this is my school—I wish I could come [be a student] here everyday. (H.H., personal communication, 2003)

One example of when parents, students, and teachers work and learn together is a field trip to observe *Tashlich*. Tashlich is held the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, when Jews go to a river to pray and cast bread and lint into the water. The tradition of Tashlich is taken from Micah 7:19: "Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depth of the sea." The school Director, the Judaic Studies Director, parents, and volunteers are gathered in the teachers' lounge discussing how they will transport students for the field trip. The plan is to take 10 parent vehicles to transport Heritage Academy's 42 students and teachers to observe *Tashlich* ("You will cast"). The destination is a pedestrian bridge overlooking the Arkansas River, some 7 miles away from Heritage Academy's campus. Prior to the trip, the Director



explained to me that the observance of Tashlich is not to represent casting our “sins,” but casting our “transgressions”—our sins against other people:

Today we’re going to go to the river and we’re going to throw away the bread crumbs. I think of it as “sin.” [Renner, the Judaic Studies Director] told me before, “No . . . you’ve got this ‘sin’ thing wrong.” To me, sin is solitary: your sin, my sin. Transgressions become, “Did I hurt you? Was I wrong to somebody else? What was going on?” So, how could I do something outside of the norm? . . . Sin is like this. Transgression is a hook. (H.H., personal communication, 2003)

The Director of Judaic Studies smiles and says that although the younger students were taught about the event, they “still think they’re going to the river to feed the ducks.” With this in mind, teachers and parents gather the children into the hallway and begin assigning students to various cars. During this time, parents and teachers joke amongst themselves as to which of them needs to bring the most bread to toss into the river. One boy causes problems as the students wait to get into the various vehicles. “Sam is trying to get a few more sins in before we leave,” a parent jokes.

Our driver is the Jewish Community’s new *Shaliach* (emissary) from Israel. The Shaliach has two children in Heritage Academy. During the drive, adult conversation centers on American English (for the sake of the Shaliach) and meanings of Tashlich. While the adults talk, the three children eat cookies and wrestle in the back seats of the van.

It is a short walk from the parking lot to the middle of the windy bridge. Here the boys (kipot-clad), girls, and adults begin by reciting a verse in Hebrew. Afterwards the same prayer is said in English:

You will cast all their sins into the sea  
and may You cast all the sins  
of Your people . . .

Bread is passed out and children and adults toss it into the river. The atmosphere is light-hearted. “We are feeding the fish our sins,” the Shaliach jokes to me.

The Director quietly bows her head and tosses her bread into the river below. Other adults do the same. Then teachers, parents, and children peacefully walk together back to their cars to return to the school.

## Review of Research Results

Several themes emerged from the research findings (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). These themes revealed that the Jewish day school curriculum models several principles recommended by the Character Education Partnership

(2000, 2002) for effective character training to occur (Lickona, et al., n.d.). The themes found at Heritage Academy included:

1. Character training comes from core ethical values based on a belief in religious absolutes prevalent throughout concurrent curricula.
2. The definition of character focuses on training students how to think and how to act based on the discussion of the Talmud and Torah.
3. Character training is comprehensive—it is woven throughout the school's concurrent curricula.
4. The school culture is a caring community that provides multiple opportunities for moral action. This is seen in the small school size, the celebration of special events and holidays, traditional Jewish music, shared responsibilities, and, parental and community involvement.
5. Character training is supported by a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum.
6. Teachers and leadership model good character by creating a collegial atmosphere, model the expected morals and showing respect for each other and for the students. In addition, students become moral leaders in service and care for others as early as second grade.
7. Character training includes strong parental support and involvement.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Each of the findings learned about character education at a Jewish day school has implications for both public and private schools (Rothstein et al., 1999; Yin, 2003). Researchers suggest that qualitative research and case studies are not generalizable to wider populations but to theory (Ward Schofield, 1990; Winter, 2000; Yin, 1994; 2003). Case study research brings understanding to complex issues like character education and builds on previous research (Soy, 1996). A case study should not be thought of in terms of generalizability, but in terms of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study was, therefore, not concerned with generalizing its findings to the masses, but with transferring its findings to schools that might have similar contexts.

### Implications for Public Schools

Integration and the importance of the school mission is a research finding that can be broadly transferred to many educational settings (Rothstein et al., 1999; Yin, 2003). Schools wishing to develop character in their students should strongly consider making character development a key part of their mission statement (Jones, 1999). Furthermore, these schools should intentionally integrate a character education emphasis into the concurrent curricula through course goals and objectives, classroom instruction, and

school activities. Finally, student progress should be based not only on academic achievement but also on character development.

An obvious strength of Heritage Academy's culture is its small student body. By having a small number of students, students can more easily observe correct behavior modeled by the teachers and are held more accountable for their actions. While most public school districts cannot realistically afford to downsize to 42 students per school, schools should investigate ways to create smaller subdivisions of students for the purposes of unity, culture, and character training. For example, an elementary school with multiple classes per grade could use the same facilities to build a "school within a school" by dividing buildings or floors into small "schools" where younger students would have the security and familiarity of being in the same environment with multiple grades and would have older children as models. Secondary schools should consider having teachers track students in homeroom situations and teach each group of students two or more times a day in order to become more familiar with the students. Having students in a smaller school setting creates a familiar and supportive environment for reinforcing character.

I think the kids feel more connected to the teachers because everyone knows me and so there's a connection there between all the students—the youngest and the oldest—and the teachers—because we all know each other. I see that as a real Strength [of our school]. (F.I.M., personal communication, 2003)

Good deeds can be emphasized in public schools by teaching America's Judeo-Christian heritage. Teaching about American heritage can emphasize to students that we do good things to others because, historically, Americans have been kind to neighbors, visitors, the poor, etc. While public schools are not allowed to promote the Bible's teachings, in order to solidify character education in students, these schools should emphasize character in the context of the moral and religious values that have impacted our country's beginnings and all major social reforms (Lickona, 1999). Like the teaching of good deeds, schools should consider teaching character based on Judeo-Christian morals:

[It is understood that] no single system of religion or morality may be prescribed by government. However, school personnel should help students to (1) recognize the sources of morality in history, law, and experience; and (2) appreciate the significant contributions of religion, including respect for the sacredness of human life and belief in the freedom of worship. Prominent in the shaping of fundamental moral values in our society has been the influence of the Judeo-Christian heritage. (California Department of Education, 1995, p. 12)

The Jewish day school shows that character education based on religious values can be thoroughly integrated throughout the concurrent curricula. The impact of religion on character training must be taken into consideration for public schools as well (Benninga & Wynne, 1998; Glanzer, 1999; Haynes & Thomas, 1998).

### Implications for Private Religious Schools

The integration of religious beliefs and character training into the curriculum makes the transferability of the study's findings even more applicable to private, religious schools—specifically schools that label themselves *Christian*.

Christian schools should take a closer look at true integration of biblical values throughout the curriculum. Christian schools are often accused of teaching values as issues separate from the academic curriculum (Van Brummelen, 2002). Instead, Christian schools should proactively teach character throughout the entire curricular program. The typical Jewish day school spends several more hours per week in direct study of Judaism than most Christian schools do in Bible. In addition, the purpose of most extra-curricular activities at the day school includes the character value of helping others. Finally, the Judaic teachings are carried out throughout the operational curriculum—partially through objectives, but mostly through a close working relationship between the Director of Judaic Studies and the teachers.

Like public schools, Christian schools should consider editing their mission statements to include character development as a key focus. While several Christian schools may currently have terms like *discipleship*, *leadership*, or *Christ-likeness* in their mission statements, these terms are not as precisely related to character development as the Jewish day school's promotion of mitzvot and Tikkun Olam.

Teaching character through school culture is another way Christian schools can learn from the Jewish day school. The purpose of day school education is the transference of culture—making sure the Jewish culture is not lost for the next generation (Elkin, 2002a). Day school students are taught that mitzvot and Tikkun Olam are the Jewish way. Likewise, they learn to think “like rabbis” as they study the Torah and Talmud. Students at Jewish day schools learn to do and say things not merely because they are *right* but because “that’s the way Jewish people do things.” Christian schools should consider promoting a Christian culture as observed in history and a biblical worldview. In addition, Christian educators should consider the sustaining of a Christian culture to be a primary purpose of schooling children. Like the day school, the Christian school should use the promotion of good works as a means of teaching character.

Mitzvot projects (Efron, 1994) and Jewish values should also be taught in the Christian school. Christians have lost much of their cultural heritage by setting aside Old Testament and Jewish traditions (Wilson, 1989). Yet

curriculum at the Jewish day school says culture, traditions, and community can be used to teach character.

## CONCLUSION

The curriculum at a Jewish day school teaches character through curriculum integration, school culture, mitzvot, and Jewish religious beliefs and traditions. Research has not only affirmed the effectiveness of several of these methods for teaching character but also suggests many of these methods are how character should be taught (Lickona, et al., n.d.). This study concluded that the strength of Jewish day school character education lies in its ability to teach from a religious foundation. It is the religious foundation at the day school that enables the curriculum to be fully integrated—the concurrent curricula are based on the school's religious beliefs.

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