

 THE JEWISH
EDUCATION PROJECT

REIMAGINING ISRAEL EDUCATION



UNDERSTANDING EXCELLENT ISRAEL EDUCATION

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This essay is part of a larger collection of research commissioned for Reimagining Israel Education, an initiative of The Jewish Education Project. In the wake of the attacks on October 7, Reimagining Israel Education sought to anchor the growth of Israel education in a strategic approach to Jewish education, reimagined for this era of Jewish life and for today's learners. More information can be found at [jewishedproject.org](https://www.jewishedproject.org) and [educator.jewishedproject.org](https://www.educator.jewishedproject.org).



Facilitated by The Jewish Education Project in partnership with The Jim Joseph Foundation and Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, the Reimagining Israel Education initiative offers a strategic framework for Israel education, appropriate for this new, post-October 7 era of Jewish life. A collaborative project that emerges from existing work (rather than beginning anew), several pieces of field analysis ground the project. These pieces include the following:

A review of Israel education curricula that draws conclusions about needed curriculum development

1

A review of relevant literature—primarily academic research, program evaluations, and theoretical work—from recent decades

2

This document, a study of excellent educators' ideas about Israel education

3

Each component provides key ideas that support the recommendations emerging from the Reimagining initiative.

Introduction

In the years since the launch of Birthright and its emphasis on data collection, there has been a rise in empirical research on Israel education (Reingold et al., 2025). Much of this research has focused on the learner experience (Zakai, 2024), particularly among elementary and secondary school learners (Reingold et al., 2025). Recent work by Sivan Zakai and Matt Reingold (2024) has sought to provide a field correction by turning the scholarly gaze toward educators' experiences and their role in teaching about Israel. But generally, the voices of educators are under-represented in scholarly research on Israel education, and theories about excellence as articulated by educators are particularly rare.

In this context, this report was developed with the goal of learning about smart practices in Israel education with the specific intention of understanding how Israel educators understand the goals of Israel education as well as how they navigate the challenges they face in their practice.

To construct the study, interviews were conducted with 11 senior Jewish education leaders. They were chosen through collegial recommendations;

colleagues identified the 11 as being at the forefront of their fields for a variety of reasons, including their reflective capacities, experience, and reputations among their learners as rigorous and thoughtful. All 11 have grappled with the challenges of Israel education.

This report captures what the interviewees are seeing and experiencing in classrooms, at campsites, and on campuses. What emerged offers a small window into a profession that is transforming during a traumatic period in Israel's recent history while maintaining its steadfast commitment to providing learners with opportunities to meaningfully engage in Israel's many facets.

The report begins with a description of the research methods. The next section contains key findings organized around three topics: considerations about the ideological orientations that Israel educators have toward their profession, pedagogical approaches that Israel educators consider when teaching, and considerations that relate to the politics of Israel education. The report concludes with a series of recommendations based on the findings.

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Methods

To construct the study, the Reimagining Israel Education team sought, through word of mouth, to identify educators with significant experience teaching and facilitating Israel education programs and serving in leadership positions within their organizations. We sought educators who are known to have their fingers on the pulse of trends and changes in the Jewish and Israel education landscapes. Another criterion was their supervision and/or mentorship of educators who teach about Israel. Finally, we sought to include educators from across the Jewish communal landscape, ideally including, at least, congregational educators, day school leaders, Hillel directors, and camp educators. We saw this as an exploratory study, the very beginning of grounded theory, intended to bring out ideas and issues but not bring finality or breadth of data to the findings that would emerge.

The team created an interview protocol (shared in the Appendix). Dr. Matt Reingold, an experienced Israel educator, researcher, and author, conducted the semi-structured interviews via Zoom, each interview lasting about forty-five minutes. Interviews were recorded, and data were coded and reviewed to confirm findings.

Ultimately, eleven senior Jewish education leaders participated in the project: Five currently work in day schools, two work for Hillel on college campuses, one works for a national camping organization, one works as a director of education at a synagogue, one works as an Israel education consultant, and one trains teachers in Israel education. Most have served in other professional roles in various settings in their careers, and they bring lenses and experiences from their service across settings and denominations.



To best ensure that these senior Jewish education leaders could speak candidly, they were afforded confidentiality. They are therefore identified in this report by initials (not their actual initials) as follows.

- AP** Hillel director
- BZ** Assistant director, national camping organization
- CW** Principal, consulting agency
- DS** University Israel education teacher-educator
- FR** Hillel director
- HN** Head of school, community Jewish day school
- MB** Middle school assistant principal, K-12 independent Jewish school
- OL** Director of learning; Conservative elementary Jewish day school
- PG** Director of Judaic studies, community Jewish elementary day school
- TU** Head of Israel education; Modern Orthodox secondary school
- YE** Education director, Reform synagogue

Key Findings

This report shares findings according to three high-level areas of educators' work. First, we share findings related to educators' orientations, or the ideological considerations or commitments that the interviewees have as Israel educators. Second, we share pedagogical findings related to the decisions and moves that educators make in their classrooms. Third, we relate findings about the politics of Israel education, or considerations related to the politics of being engaged in a high-stakes field where organizational donors and learner parents are deeply invested in the "what" and "how" of education.



ORIENTATION CONSIDERATIONS *Educators' ideological considerations or commitments*

1 A personal connection to Israel is essential to being a successful Israel educator.

A consistent refrain across the interviews was that educators need a personal connection to Israel to teach it effectively.

The interviewees identified two reasons why educators need to have their own connection to Israel.

1. A personal connection to Israel ensures that the educators have a stake in what they are teaching. The interviewees believe that even if an educator does not share his or her individual politics, the fact that he or she is interested in Israel signals to the learners that the subject matters. The educators' own interest should spark a strong interest in Israel among the students.
2. A personal connection to Israel also helps ensure that educators are better prepared to teach about Israel: When we care about something, we learn more about it. As such, we frequently update our knowledge and our commitments.

2 And yet, the educator's personal connection to Israel does not belong in the classroom.

At the same time, the interviewees clearly expressed that while a personal connection to Israel is essential, the details of that connection should not be brought into the classroom. In their experience, when educators call attention to their own thoughts about Israel or their personal positive feelings about the country, it detracts from students' ability to form their own ideas from the full range of evidence and opportunities. More specifically, educators identified three risks in relying on personal connections and beliefs:

1. The educator might gloss over challenging topics in Israeli history and contemporary society just to convey positive messages.
2. The educator might alienate learners who do not share their educator's beliefs.
3. A learning space might be created that prevents learners from asking challenging questions or sharing their own ideas.

3 Students opposed to Israel and students disengaged from Israel are not the same, and each profile needs to be better understood.

The interviewees described two archetypes or profiles of students who present challenges in the Israel education learning space:

1. Students who are disengaged from Israel, and
2. Students who are opposed to Israel's existence as a Jewish state.

The interviewees expressed sadness about working with both groups of students, even as they recognized that the two groups of students are expressing different ideas, interests, and attitudes.

For some of the interviewees, disengaged students are simply students who are not yet engaged. There may be reasons for their not-yet-engagement, and these reasons need to be uncovered while space is made for them in the learning environment.

In contrast, the interviewees primarily understood students who are opposed to Israel's existence as a Jewish state as, in fact, engaged with Israel. As MB described, their stances demonstrate, for example, that "you care that Israel is living up to its values as a light unto the nations and you want it to—even if you think it isn't." Such students' caring matters.

The interviewees saw importance in unpacking a student's "anti-Israel" stance. CW, for example, sees such an identity as a catchall phrase that could mean many things. As he outlined, he would want to know whether the student is referring to the government, the people, the country, the land, or something else.

In both cases, rather than approaching the learner with criticism, the educators work from a place of understanding, which can help build a relationship and open dialogue with the student. This dialogue can inform how the educator responds not to perceived issues but specifically to the learner's actual concerns.

IN SUM

An excellent Israel educator manages their orientation as an educator, aiming to:

Build their personal connection to Israel,

In the classroom, hold that personal connection close, letting it motivate them without imposing it on students, and

Make space for alternate stances to be shared, particularly for students who have antipathy or apathy toward Israel



PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

4 Successful Israel educators possess an identifiable set of practices and knowledge that they bring to their teaching.

The interviewees believe that good Israel educators possess the same traits that all good educators possess. They engage in "reflective" practice, they are "collaborative" with colleagues, and they are "committed to professional growth." The interviewees also spoke about:

- Encouraging curiosity and engaging with critical thinking,
- Fostering a love of the subject matter and conveying why the subject is essential,
- Effectively facilitating debate and discussion and meeting learners where they are by caring more about them than about the topic.

The interviewees shared an understanding that in addition to being skilled teachers, Israel educators require pedagogical content knowledge that is specific to Israel education. They identified three specific educator traits that effective Israel educators possess. Israel educators are:

1. Courageous and unafraid to engage with difficult conversations and contentious issues, such as living alongside the Palestinian people and what it means for Jews to be in positions of power. Good Israel educators "regularly acknowledge the messiness and the problematic elements at play" (PG).
2. Open to hearing voices and perspectives that differ from their own and creating environments that not only tolerate but actively welcome differences.
3. Creative and able to improvise mid-lesson in response to learners' questions and comments.

Like all educators, effective Israel educators must have subject-matter expertise. Having a deep understanding of Israel gives educators the confidence to stand before a group of curious learners who ask challenging questions about Israel's existence. This is particularly the case for high school Israel educators, for whom students' questions can be very sophisticated.

5 Between fostering love or connection, educators should prioritize teaching connection to Israel.

Many of the interviewees noted that it is typical for Israel educators to desire an affective learning goal—a “love” of Israel. (Their observation was confirmed by Kopelowitz et al. (2024), whose research with 1,000 frontline educators found that 59% saw a component of their job as being to “reinforce love of Israel.”) At the same time, most of the interviewees (all but one) saw these affective learning goals as problematic in their emphasis on students’ *feelings* over knowledge and understanding.

The interviewees raised four concerns regarding the idea that educators should teach about Israel so that their students develop a love for the country.

1. Love, as it is often understood in the context of Israel, is superficial and/or biased in favor of Israel; it does not include deep, meaningful, or lasting learning.
2. With love as the educational goal, there may be no space to allow for learner critique or dissent.
3. If students do not love Israel, they may feel that they have failed to meet their educator’s or community’s expectations.
4. It is unrealistic to expect that a learner who has never been to Israel will love the country. Beginning with the educator’s love misdirects the learning process.

Many of the interviewees suggested that affective goals are important, but that educators should seek connection and relationship rather than passion. Though these are also affective learning goals, the interviewees understood them as possessing critical differences in that they allow critique, disagreement, and pushback. For example, OL said that when students are agitated by something in Israel, that may actually indicate the depths to which they feel connected to the country. OL even went so far as to confirm, “I want my students to feel stuff about Israel, but I don’t care about which side they are on.” These outcomes are affective but outcome neutral.



6 Israel education and Israel advocacy do not have the same educational goals.

The interviewees expressed significant reservations with the conflation of Israel advocacy and Israel education. They were adamant that the two have different educational goals and are very different in practice. Four distinctions between the two were identified:

1. Advocacy is a pedagogical approach with predetermined outcomes and a desire to win arguments. Education is a growth-oriented process.
2. Advocacy begins from a place of already knowing the answers; education begins with questions.
3. Advocacy teaches about Israel monolithically, and this deprives learners of the dignity to make informed choices about how they understand the country. Education teaches about the country from multiple perspectives, including contrasting ones, thereby dignifying learners’ ability to balance perspectives and engage further with those that resonate most.
4. Advocacy dismisses ideas that are foreign or do not fit the agenda, but education allows space for disagreement, controversy, and engagement with tough topics.

The interviewees spoke about the latent potential in Israel education for envisioning an Israel that does not yet exist. Rather than ignoring or dismissing Israel’s faults, good Israel education motivates learners to take Israel’s faults and “imagine and dream big to build the Jewish future they want to see” (BZ). The interviewees acknowledged that effective Israel education may lead students to advocate for their position; advocacy can be an outcome of good education. The interviewees were clear when they shared that there is a significant difference between education—which helps students learn to build personal, informed positions about Israel—and advocacy, which tells them what those positions should be.

IN SUMMARY

There is a unique pedagogical practice of Israel education, and educators began to describe this practice. The practice:

Follows good educational practice (good Israel education is good education),

Helps students explore and connect to Israel, rather than starting from an assumption of love, and

Distinguishes educational opportunities from advocacy training.



POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

7 When done well, teaching Israel puts educators in a precarious position.

Israel education is a high-stakes endeavor. Learners, parents, donors, and the wider Jewish community have invested significant financial resources and emotional attention into the subject's success. This deep interest places pressures and burdens on Israel educators. At the least, they work under a microscope; at the most, they are challenged to do their job effectively.

Two interviewees shared that, after October 7, their roles increasingly required them to serve as a buffer between the educators they oversee and the parents or donors to whom they must answer. This is not because their educators are doing a poor job or are teaching content that is not in line with the organization's philosophy of Israel education. Instead, as HN said, "You can't say anything without someone taking it the wrong way." As administrators, both AP and HN believe that it is essential that they serve as a buffer; doing so allows their educators to work to their fullest capabilities and not be fearful of repercussions.¹ Without that buffer, educators are in a precarious position: they can educate freely and risk their positions, or they can limit what they say.

IN SUM

Israel education is a political project, a high-stakes endeavor.

¹ AP's and HN's comments were unsolicited. The interviewer did not have the opportunity to explore similar themes with the other interviewees. No conclusions should be drawn about whether all of the interviewees have observed similar trends in their institutions. Further research should be conducted to better understand whether AP's and HN's experiences are unique or are indicative of a more widespread trend.

Analysis and Recommendations

1

Emphasize educator training:

Effective Israel educators possess three types of professional competence: mastery of general pedagogical skills, mastery of pedagogical content knowledge specific to teaching about Israel, and subject-matter expertise.

Teacher training and professional development for Israel educators are not organized by these areas of competence, nor do they seek to develop them thoroughly. Not surprisingly, the interviewees have observed a pedagogy gap among their fellow educators and/or supervisees. Aside from George Washington University's master's degree and graduate certificate in Israel education, there are no teacher-training programs that address these three competencies. Alternative training interventions from organizations like Unpacked for Educators and the iCenter do not currently offer professional development programs that help educators advance in these areas. Furthermore, the professional development interventions these types of providers offer involve one- to three-day seminars, which are too short to cover what is needed. As a result, schools, synagogues, and camps have entrusted underqualified educators with the responsibility of teaching the Jewish subject that is most complex, most high stakes, and, in many cases, most valuable to institutional stakeholders.

The field as a whole requires professionalization and an investment in in-service training. This in-service training must include clear and measurable criteria that are used to evaluate Israel educators' proficiency in the three types of professional competence. The programs must be modelled on best practices from existing in-service (general) education training. And, they must offer training in the three types of professional competence that effective educators possess. Institutions will come to expect that their Israel educators possess these professional competencies; in turn, they must invest in them by providing paid time off for in-service training. Lastly, Israel educators must similarly commit to the professionalization of the field, investing in themselves by committing the time to ongoing in-service training to help them improve their work.

2

Separate Israel education from Israel advocacy:

Israel advocacy needs to be taught in a space and with pedagogy that is distinct from Israel education. Educational institutions need to be explicit in expressing to their stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, educators, and boards of directors) that the two are not synonymous.

Effective Israel education affords learners the space to develop their own ideas, and effective educators know that this freedom means that learners will arrive at conclusions that differ from those of their peers and their educators. By definition, a corollary of good Israel education is that it may lead students to reach conclusions about Israel that fall beyond what is considered a normative position in the Jewish community. At the same time, that position may be merely a rejection of Israel as it currently is, rather than a rejection of the concept of Israel outright, and the learner's education can be used to advance the greater Israel (this concept was interviewee MB's framework). This framework need not be used only with learners who are oppositional; all learners can and, perhaps, should be encouraged to envision the Israel that they hope to see.

3

Start with connection, not love:

The rejection by most of the interviewees of love as a goal of Israel education stands in sharp contrast to the 59% of frontline educators surveyed who believed that a component of their job was to “reinforce a love of Israel” (Kopelowitz et al., 2024).

The discrepancy between Kopelowitz et al.’s educators and the interviewees (who are organizational leaders, not classroom educators) is indicative of clear and contrasting educational goals between frontline Israel educators and those in positions of leadership responsible for their organizations’ philosophies of Israel education. Leaders are ready to embrace the educational task of supporting learners to make their own meaning.

But front-line educators may not be prepared to act similarly. Organizational change is often slow-moving (Wright et al., 2004). This challenge of moving educators away from teaching with the expectation that learners love Israel toward teaching to build a relationship with Israel will likely meet resistance. This is to be expected: as the interviewees themselves observed, successful Israel educators must care about and be invested in Israel. But as educational leaders pointed out, teaching love first and, sometimes, exclusively does not leave room for learners’ own voices or exploration.

Research on Israel education offers pictures of textured, or more complicated and intricate, learning outcomes for Israel education. The research includes images of teaching that go beyond mere love. Educational institutions can develop clear philosophies of Israel education to make the institution’s values and approach to Israel explicit and to offer a stance to guide educational decisions. The gap between organizational leaders’ ideas about purpose and stance and educators’ ideas can shift over time.

4

Make the personal and professional distinct:

To afford learners the space to explore, challenge, ask questions, and articulate their thoughts and feelings about Israel, Israel educators must limit how much they reveal to their learners about their own connections to Israel. Asking this of educators is not a simple request. Almost 70% of educators favor a pedagogical approach to teaching Israel that brings their Israel story into the classroom (Pomson et al., 2014). The experiences of teachers and educators play an essential role in the background of the Israel education classroom, but not in the foreground. It is essential that they remember that they are not the subject of the learning. They must rely on their knowledge and passion while withholding their opinions and exercising caution when they override this default. Maintaining this boundary helps ensure that they remain facilitators who create meaningful, open, and transformative educational encounters with Israel for learners.



5

Protect the educational space from political pressure:

Institutional leaders must make clear to their educators that they will be defended against criticism from parents and donors provided they adhere to the institution’s Israel education philosophy. Not surprisingly, research has shown that educators are concerned about whether their administrators will support them if complaints are lodged; this concern is a barrier to their entry to being Israel educators (Fraiman, 2024). It is therefore incumbent upon leaders to proactively convey their support to their educators. Doing so will help alleviate educators’ concerns and allow them to teach to their potential.

6

Expand educators’ voices in the research:

The perspectives of the eleven educators in this study showed striking convergence, sharing insights that cut across settings, roles, and contexts. At the same time, these voices represent only an initial sampling, an opening into a broader and deeper body of knowledge represented by educators in the field. Attending closely to educators’ descriptions of their practice, without asking them to reflect on specific initiatives in evaluation research, and without imposing predetermined hypotheses, creates space for new understandings of Israel education to emerge. Such an approach makes it possible to develop theory that is genuinely grounded in lived practice, responsive to the complexity of contemporary educational realities, and less constrained by existing frameworks or assumptions.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

I. Background and Framing

1. Can you briefly describe your background in Israel education?
(Prompt: How long have you been involved? In what kinds of settings or organizations?)

II. Defining “Successful” Israel Educators

2. When you think of the most successful Israel educators you've worked with or observed, what qualities or abilities stand out?
(Follow-up probes if needed: Is it their knowledge? Their approach to discussion? Their relationship with learners?)
3. What role do personal connection or love of Israel and lived experience play in a successful educator's effectiveness?
4. What is the place for teaching learners to love Israel? Is this one of your goals in Israel education, and where does it fit in?
5. What does Israel advocacy mean to you, and what is its place or role of Israel advocacy in effective Israel education?
6. If a student disengages from Israel or becomes opposed to Israel, is this a failure of their Israel education?

III. Skills and Competencies in Practice

7. What are the specific skills or strategies you've seen the best educators use to navigate challenging or sensitive topics related to Israel?
(Prompt: These might include topics like Israeli politics, occupation, Jewish-Arab relations, or differing diaspora perspectives.)
8. How do the best educators create inclusive and engaging learning environments when students come from a wide range of political, religious, or cultural backgrounds?

