



THE JEWISH
EDUCATION PROJECT

REIMAGINING ISRAEL EDUCATION



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ISRAEL IN JEWISH EDUCATION

A LITERATURE REVIEW

BENJI DAVIS & EZRA KOPELOWITZ

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Benji Davis is Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education. During the summer he is Head of Israel Education at Camp Yavneh. He has a PhD in Education from the University of Haifa. **Ezra Kopelowitz** is CEO of Research Success Technologies and Co-Director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, and lives on Kibbutz Hannaton, Israel.

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 and 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:

- 1** A review of Israel education curricula that draws conclusions about needed curriculum development
- 2** A study of excellent educators' ideas about Israel education
- 3** This document, a review of relevant literature—primarily academic research, program evaluations, and theoretical work—from recent decades

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

INTRODUCTION:

The Context for Reimagining Israel Education

Field Development and Institutional Growth

The contemporary field of Israel education that emerged in the 1990s was built on decades of earlier educational thought. As early as 1930, Alexander Dushkin called for “sanity in the teaching of Palestine,” warning against over-idealizing the Yishuv (Dushkin, 1930). By the 1960s, scholars were mapping Israel’s growing role in American Jewish school curricula (Dinin, 1968; Kuselewitz, 1958; Schiff, 1984). Systematic critiques beginning in the 1970s then provided theoretical frameworks arguing that the “romanticized” and “mythologized” Israel of existing curricula was failing to engage new generations (Chazan, 1978, 1979, 1984; Ackerman, 1979, 1996). These voices established the intellectual foundation for reforms that would then emerge in the 1990s.



Alarm over Distancing from Israel

The field of Israel education as it currently exists began in the 1990s, largely in response to alarming demographic findings about **American Jews’ relationship with Israel**. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey sparked intense debate about the “Israel distancing hypothesis”—the concern that younger American Jews were becoming increasingly disconnected from Israel compared to their parents’ generation (Cohen, 1995; Cohen & Eisen, 2000; Wertheimer et al., 1996). This perceived distancing, particularly among non-Orthodox Jews, generated alarm within Jewish communal leadership and prompted substantial philanthropic investment in new educational initiatives, even as later research would challenge whether such distancing was actually occurring (Sasson et al., 2010).

Catalyzed Investment in Israel Education

The convergence of demographic concerns—whether real or perceived—and of communal anxiety catalyzed the development of new educational practices, supporting institutions, and dedicated programming designed to nurture more meaningful connections between Jews living outside Israel and the country and its people. **This growth included the expansion of people-to-people education through *mifgashim* (encounters) and Israeli *shlichim* (emissary) programs and dramatic increases in Israel educational travel—including programs such as Birthright Israel**. It also included the founding of organizations dedicated to Israel education, such as Makom, the iCenter, the Center for Israel Education (CIE), and Unpacked for Educators, as well as the significant expansion of financial resources from the Israeli government, Jewish federations, and philanthropic sources (Gerber & Mazor, 2003; iCenter, 2012; Kopelowitz et al., 2009).

Growth of an Israel Education Literature

In addition to their roots in demographic concerns, these new initiatives emerged from a communal and philanthropic recognition that existing educational approaches were inadequate. Scholars throughout the 1970s and 1980s documented that educational paradigms that emphasized an uncritical celebration of Israel or avoided difficult topics entirely were alienating younger generations (Chazan, 1978, 1979, 1984; Schiff, 1984; Ackerman, 1979, 1996). **By the late 1980s and early 1990s, these critiques coalesced into calls for fundamental rethinking that would move beyond superficial approaches toward more nuanced and complex engagement. Alongside this institutional growth emerged a substantial literature that studied diverse practice and its influence on learners.**

The Urgent Need to Address the Knowledge–Practice Gap

The literature has flourished—grown more substantial—but it is simultaneously distant from practice and underutilized in the field. This gap became glaring in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 terror attack, as research uncovered the concerns of educators about their lack of preparation for the moment and, specifically, a gap in their professional training that might have helped them access skills in teaching or managing complexity, controversy, multivocality, disagreement, and related (Kopelowitz et al., 2024). Research-based approaches to engaging learners with Israel’s complexities and supporting diverse viewpoints in classroom settings already existed well before October 7, yet few educators had access to or training in these pedagogies.

In addition to their lack of training, as studies before and since October 7 have shown, educators can also be reluctant to address controversial topics, which also prevents learners from developing the sophisticated thinking needed to comprehend and grapple with navigate Israel’s realities (Fraiman, 2024; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Davis & Alexander, 2024). Ultimately, diverse approaches to engaging complexity either as subject matter (as in the complexity of the modern state) or in pedagogy have been documented and tested across multiple educational contexts, yet they remain scattered and inaccessible to many practitioners (Davis & Alexander, 2023).



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Literature Review and Seven Knowledge Foundations

The Israel education research literature consists of diverse sources produced by researchers, evaluators, and educators working with or within Jewish educational institutions. The literature comprises these types of sources.

Scholarly research:	Peer-reviewed academic studies with theoretical frameworks and formal analysis that typically appear in academic journals and are characterized by rigorous methodology
Program evaluation research:	Assessments of specific Israel education programs and interventions that focus on practical outcomes and program improvement through both internal organizational learning and external independent assessment
Thought leadership materials:	Articles, reports, and position papers that synthesize field knowledge, propose new directions, and bridge theory and practice that are often produced by leading practitioners and organizational leaders
Field-building documents:	Reports, white papers, and organizational materials that contribute to institutional development and coordination and support the infrastructure needed for field growth



This review analyzes decades' worth of research, evaluation, and thought leadership to identify patterns, synthesize findings, and organize insights for evidence-based decision-making. Seven "knowledge foundations" emerge from the literature analysis as an intellectual framework that offers summary conclusions from the literature as well as direction for further inquiry.

These knowledge foundations are as follows:

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|--|--|
| <p>1 Early Engagement with Difficult Ideas</p> | <p>5 Multidimensional Learning Experiences</p> |
| <p>2 Integration into Daily Jewish Life</p> | <p>6 Engaging with Difficult Questions</p> |
| <p>3 Relationship-Centered Learning</p> | <p>7 Cumulative Effect Across Educational Settings</p> |
| <p>4 Learner Agency and Voice</p> | |

The seven knowledge foundations that emerge from the Israel education literature reflect a developmental progression:

Core Foundations
(Foundations 1-4)

These establish the essential building blocks of effective Israel education—introducing difficult or uncomfortable concepts early, integrating Israel into daily life, building relationships, and developing learner ownership.

Integration
(Foundation 5)

This brings together the four core foundations to enable learners to connect with Israel through thinking, feeling, and acting as a natural and integrated experience in which they develop their personal understanding of why Israel matters to them.

Advanced Application
(Foundation 6)

This represents the culmination of these capacities to engage with difficult questions and challenging realities.

Systemic Approach
(Foundation 7)

This addresses how experiences across educational settings accumulate to create coherent learning journeys.

Following an exploration of the seven foundations, this review illustrates how these foundations are expressed in practice across different educational settings, examines cross-cutting educational practices that span multiple contexts, and identifies priority areas for future research based on gaps revealed in the literature.

Seven Knowledge Foundations of Excellent Israel Education

FOUNDATION 1:

Early Engagement with Difficult Ideas

Overview

Children naturally think about complicated things. They are (perhaps accidentally or vicariously) often exposed to the news, and they can generate challenging questions about the world around them. They recognize and can feel stymied when they receive only one side of a story. Moreover, when students learn about Israel's real challenges alongside its achievements, they typically develop better critical thinking skills.

When educators aim foremost to help students develop a foundation of positive Israel connection, students inevitably discover Israel's complexities through social media, conversations with friends, or college courses, and they can feel misled or unprepared to process what they are learning (Applebaum et al., 2021; Davis & Alexander, 2024; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012). Ultimately, children are better equipped to stay connected to Israel over the long term when they understand it critically or encounter difficult concepts at the inception of their relationship with the subject matter.



Key Findings

Developmental readiness:

Research has show that children can engage with difficult or uncomfortable topics much earlier than traditionally believed (Applebaum et al., 2021).

Cognitive framework building:

Early exposure to difficult concepts creates intellectual and emotional structures that can help students integrate new information effectively throughout life (Zakai, 2022; Davis & Alexander, 2023).

Resilience development:

Learners who engage difficult topics early show greater resilience throughout their lives when they encounter challenges or criticisms of Israel (Zakai, 2022).

FOUNDATION 2:

Integration into Daily Jewish Life

Overview

Different organizations take varied approaches to incorporating Israel into Jewish learning. Some institutions treat Israel as a discrete subject area and teach it through special units, designated weeks, stand-alone programs, or courses that remain separate from other Jewish learning. **These compartmentalized approaches position Israel as an important but distinct topic, similar to how schools might teach a foreign culture or distant history (Pomson & Chazan, 2015; Margolis, 2004).**

In contrast, integrated approaches weave Israel throughout the educational experience, thereby making it a natural or even organic part of daily Jewish life rather than a special addition. Research on liberal Jewish day schools demonstrates how this integration operates in practice. When schools embed Israel into year-round curriculum through structured programs like Israel Senior Seminars, weave Israeli history into broader Jewish studies, and orient Hebrew instruction toward deepening Israel connections, they create environments in which Israel becomes a natural component of Jewish learning rather than an isolated subject (Hyman, 2008). In another example, intensive camp settings show how environmental design can create what researchers call “simulating the nation,” in which Israeli place names, Hebrew usage, and Zionist rituals become part of daily routines, thereby making Israel feel familiar and accessible rather than distant (Lainer-Vos, 2014).



When Israel is integrated into regular Jewish practice and learning, it stops being a separate subject and instead becomes a driver for broader Jewish engagement, thus strengthening learners' connections not just to Israel but to their overall Jewish involvement (Sinclair, 2013; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Isaacs, 2011; Ariel, 2010, Kopelowitz, 2009; The iCenter for Israel Education, 2015).

Israel can also be integrated into subjects beyond the typical humanities; it is embedded, for example, in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics curricula. These interdisciplinary connections help learners see Israel as a living

society that contributes to global innovation rather than only as a site of historical or religious significance (Grinfas-David, 2021).

Finally, Israel becomes most meaningful when it is woven into everyday Jewish experiences through Hebrew usage in casual conversation, Israeli music during activities, current events discussions at meals, and holiday celebrations that incorporate Israeli traditions. Learners who experience this integration identify feeling the relevancy and meaning of Israel in their lives as young Jews (Aharon & Pomson, 2018; Avidar, 2016; Pomson et al., 2014; Sinclair, 2013; Kopelowitz, 2005).

Key Findings

Creating constant connection:

Physical spaces featuring Israeli art, maps, and Hebrew create constant connection points without formal instruction (Aharon & Pomson, 2018; Pomson, Deitcher, & Rose, 2009; Sinclair, 2009; The iCenter for Israel Education, 2015).

Integrating a living language:

Integrating Hebrew learning as a cultural experience builds learners' appreciation for the relevance of Israel and Jewish culture (Benor & Avineri, 2019; Ergas, 2023).

Making Israel familiar:

Casual exposure to Israeli food, music, and cultural practices builds familiarity that reduces the sense of Israel as foreign or distant (Bryfman & Chazan, 2015; Lanski et al., 2015; Soberman & Stewart, 2015; Kopelowitz & Wolf, 2013b).

FOUNDATION 3:

Relationship-Centered Learning

Overview

Relationships transform abstract concepts about Jewish peoplehood into lived experiences that motivate engagement. When learners form genuine connections with Israeli peers, educators, or community members, Israel shifts from an idea to a real place where people whom they care about live. **These personal bonds create emotional investment that acts as an anchor: When learners later encounter criticism of Israel or grapple with its imperfections, they remain engaged because of the concrete, intimate connection they have formed** (Ravid, 2021; Kopelowitz & Ravid 2010; Wolf, 2010; Sasson et al., 2008; Kopelowitz, 2003b; Cohen, 2000; Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997).

The power of relationship-based learning emerges most clearly in research on *mifgashim* (encounters) between North American and Israeli youth. These structured engagements create concrete feelings of belonging that extend well beyond the program's duration. Participants describe these encounters as personally pivotal moments when Israel shifted for them from an abstract concept to a place populated by real people with whom they share connections (Ben-David & Hacoen Wolf, 2018; Stewart, 2015; Chertok et al., 2013; Levisohn, 2012; Sasson et al., 2011; Feldman & Katz, 2002; Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997). Research on virtual encounters has demonstrated that online meetings can

also foster meaningful connections and expand possibilities for relationship-building beyond in-person meetings (Kopelowitz & Franco Galor, 2025; Kopelowitz, 2023).

For many, these relationships can serve as the primary vehicle for developing a connection to Israel, with learning emerging organically through social experiences rather than formal instruction. Adolescents across day schools, summer camps, and youth movements come to process their relationship with Israel through dialogue with friends and also with counselors, teachers, and group leaders. **Young people come to contest and negotiate their understanding of Israel within these groups, thereby transforming it from a distant concept into a lived dimension of Jewish belonging** (Bryfman, 2009; Cohen, 2009). Learners encounter Israelis bringing authentic contemporary perspectives to daily interactions; youth movements in particular have demonstrated how peer leadership transforms Israel education into participatory learning in which Israel becomes a shared project rather than an imposed subject (Cohen, 2018; Miller, 2014).



Key Findings

Transforming abstract to personal:

Direct encounters with Israeli peers **generate stronger, more lasting connections than learning about Israel through curriculum alone**. Participants have reported that the encounters transformed their understanding of Israeli society from abstract concepts to human connections (Sasson et al., 2008, 2011; Kopelowitz, 2023, 2021a; E. H. Cohen, 2000).

Creating living bridges:

Israeli *shlichim* serving in North American settings create living connections that make Israel tangible and accessible for learners across age groups. These emissaries bring contemporary Israeli culture, Hebrew as a living language, and diverse perspectives that expose learners to the diversity and variations within Israeli society. Moreover, their presence transforms Israel from distant news stories into daily relationships with counselors, teachers, and mentors who share personal narratives and ongoing connections to Israeli life (Kedar, 2025, 2018; Aharonov, 2015; Kopelowitz, 2003a, 2003b; Wolf & Kopelowitz, 2003).

Building lasting connections:

Programs that facilitate **ongoing connections through technology, return visits, or partnership programs show greater long-term impact on learner engagement**. School twinning initiatives and partnership programs demonstrate the extent to which institutional relationships can scaffold individual connections over time (Saxe et al., 2017; Chertok et al., 2013, 2014; Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010). et al., 2015; Soberman & Stewart, 2015; Kopelowitz & Wolf, 2013b).



FOUNDATION 4:

Learner Agency and Voice

Overview

When learners have genuine choice and voice in their educational experience, they develop deeper understandings and more personally meaningful connections to Israel. **Taking ownership of their learning journey enables learners to construct individualized meaning that resonates with their own experiences and questions.** In this frame, learners become co-creators of meaning, and this shift transforms both the educational process and its outcomes (Kelner, 2019; Kelman & Pomson, 2021; Levisohn, 2019; Chazan, 2016).

Educators play a critical role in creating structures that enable learner ownership while providing guidance and support. **Rather than stepping aside in this model, skilled educators design frameworks within which learners can exercise meaningful choice, facilitate reflection that deepens understanding, and scaffold experiences that build capacity for independent exploration** (Davis & Alexander, 2024; Reingold et al, 2024; Winer, 2023; Sinclair et al., 2013; Weissman, 2017).

This ownership becomes particularly powerful when educators enable their learners to take on teaching roles themselves. Peer education opportunities create multiplier effects throughout educational communities. **When learners lead Israel education activities—whether teaching younger students, facilitating discussions, or designing programs—they deepen their own knowledge while developing skills and confidence that extend beyond Israel education. Their peers benefit from relatable role models who demonstrate that young people can shape their own Israel connections.** Learner-led initiatives, from teen-designed programs to student-facilitated discussions, generate sustained engagement and deepen community connections (Rosov Consulting, 2024a; Moore & Woocher, 2019; Hassenfeld, 2018).

Key Findings

Enabling choice:

Programs that offer learners meaningful choices—such as selecting which aspects of Israel to explore, choosing between different learning formats, or deciding how to express their learning through art, writing, or action—show high engagement and deep learning. These choices transform learners from course participants into learning partners (Levisohn & Kelman, 2019; Chazan, 2016; The iCenter for Israel Education, 2015).

Learning from peers:

When students teach each other about Israel through collaborative projects, peer-led discussions, youth movement programming, or youth-to-youth presentations, both the teachers and learners show strong outcomes. Teaching others requires deep understanding, while learning from peers feels relatable and non-hierarchical. **Research on Jewish adolescent identity formation demonstrates that peer groups serve as primary drivers of learning and engagement, with student-led activities proving central to meaningful educational outcomes, particularly in youth movements in which teens function as program creators and ideological leaders** (Bryfman, 2009; Hassenfeld, 2016, 2018; Rosov Consulting, 2024a; Moore & Woocher, 2019; Cohen, 2009; Miller, 2014).

Building resilient connections:

Learners who actively interpret Israel through their own lens develop deep self-understanding of their connection by examining their personal values in the context of their family history, Jewish experiences, and life journey. As a result, when they encounter criticism or controversy about Israel, they are able to engage constructively by listening to different perspectives, learning from challenges, and responding thoughtfully rather than disconnecting entirely. This personal grounding allows them to navigate critique and discomfort without feeling forced to either defend everything or reject the relationship altogether (Davis & Alexander, 2024, 2025; Reingold, 2017, 2018, 2022).

FOUNDATION 5:

Multidimensional Learning Experiences

Overview

Effective Israel education engages learners through multiple dimensions simultaneously, including intellectual understanding, emotional connection, and active (i.e., hands-on) participation. When programs combine knowledge acquisition with emotional engagement and hands-on experiences, learners develop both more profound understanding and stronger connections than through any single approach alone (Chazan, 2016, 2022; Pomson & Chazan, 2015; Kelner, 2019).

This multidimensional approach recognizes that different learners connect through different pathways. **Some engage first through intellectual curiosity, others through emotional experiences, and still others through physical activity or creative expression.** Programs that offer multiple entry points and varied learning modalities are thought to reinforce learning effectively through different channels (Moore & Woocher, 2019; Levisohn & Kelman, 2019; Bryfman & Chazan, 2015).

The integration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions mirrors how people actually experience connection in their lives. Learners don't just think about Israel or feel about Israel—they engage with Israel through actions, relationships, and experiences. Educational approaches that honor this varied and lived experience create complete and lasting engagement (Soberman & Stewart, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010; Pomson & Chazan, 2015).



While engaging multiple dimensions generally creates rich individual experiences, these dimensions are each maximized when they work together. **When programs treat thinking, feeling, and doing as separate activities—studying Israel's history in one class, celebrating Israeli culture in another, and discussing feelings about current events in a third—learners can struggle to connect these pieces into a meaningful whole.** The deepest connection happens when these elements blend naturally: Learners develop emotional bonds through relationships, think critically about complex issues, and take meaningful

action all as part of one integrated experience. Studies of educator responses post-October 7 confirm this. Teachers who focused on just one dimension (i.e., only facts, only feelings, or only activities) found their approaches inadequate during crisis, while those who wove together all three found that their approaches better helped learners maintain meaningful connections (Kopelowitz, 2025b; Kopelowitz et al., 2024).

Key Findings

Engaging head, heart, and hands:

Programs that combine intellectual learning, emotional connection, and active participation show strong outcomes across all measures of Israel education and engagement. When these three dimensions work in concert, learners develop understanding that is both personally meaningful and intellectually grounded, thereby leading to connections that persist over time (Golden, 2024; Chazan et al., 2013).

Creating embodied learning:

Physical and sensory experiences—tasting Israeli food, dancing Israeli dances, or creating art inspired by Israel—help learners internalize connections that go beyond intellectual understanding. *Mifgashim* with Israeli peers adds another embodied dimension, in which social relationships become part of the physical experience of encounter and connection. These embodied experiences create memories and associations that persist over time (Sasson et al., 2011; Lanski et al., 2015; Davis & Alexander, 2024).

Facilitating multiple expressions:

When learners can express their connection to Israel through various modes—writing, art, music, social action, or digital creation—they develop personal ownership of their relationship. Choice in expression allows learners to leverage their strengths and interests (Rosov Consulting, 2024a; Kelman et al., 2019).

FOUNDATION 6:

Engaging with Difficult Questions

Overview

The previous foundations—dealing with difficult ideas early, integration, relationships, learner ownership, and multidimensional engagement—converge in what researchers call a “mature approach” to Israel. When learners have developed multiple ways of engaging—intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally—they’re better equipped to grapple with Israel’s most challenging aspects. This mature connection goes beyond simple attachment or uncritical enthusiasm. **Learners with a mature disposition can hold in tension Israel’s achievements and struggles while simultaneously maintaining deep care and engaging honestly with difficult realities.** They neither defend reflexively nor disconnect when confronted with challenging information (Alexander, 2015; Davis & Alexander, 2023, 2024; Troy, 2023; Levisohn, 2020; Sinclair, 2013; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012).

Some pluralistic Jewish day schools demonstrate how educational environments can cultivate this mature engagement by treating Israel as a “contested arena” rather than an idealized subject. These schools encourage students to ask complicated and, possibly, discomfiting questions about Israel’s politics, society, and place in the Jewish world, thereby presenting Israel as a real and evolving nation-state with complexities that invite reflection and sometimes critique. This inherently multivocal orientation ensures that Israel education becomes an opportunity for inquiry and debate rather than indoctrination, thereby helping students to develop the capacity to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously while maintaining meaningful connection (Hyman, 2008).

Developing this mature approach requires an educational journey that is able to help learners **build capacity over time.** Young learners begin by encountering tensions and questions in an age-appropriate way. As they mature, they gain tools for processing contradictions and learn that caring about something doesn’t mean ignoring its problems. By adolescence and young adulthood, they are ready to engage with Israel’s most challenging aspects while maintaining their foundational connection. This developmental progression transforms initial enthusiasm into sustainable, thoughtful engagement (Zakai, 2022; Applebaum et al., 2021; Davis & Alexander, 2023).

The October 7 attacks and their aftermath demonstrated why this mature engagement matters for both educators and learners. Educators who had developed their own capacity for holding competing ideas and who prepared their students for uncomfortable and dissonant conversations were able to create supportive spaces for processing traumatic events while maintaining educational integrity. Moreover, their learners could engage with challenging discussions while maintaining an emotional connection to the subject matter. In contrast, educators who had avoided such work in the past found themselves scrambling for resources and language, and their students either retreated from engagement or struggled to reconcile new realities with the simpler narratives they had inherited (Kopelowitz, 2025; Krasner, 2025; Rosov Consulting, 2025; Boundless, 2024; Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2024; Reingold & Reznik, 2024).

Key Findings

Building critical thinking skills:

Learners who examine Israel’s dilemmas and debates develop stronger analytical abilities than those who do not. They learn to evaluate sources, consider multiple viewpoints, and understand that caring about something doesn’t require defending every aspect of it (Hassenfeld, 2016; Reingold, 2021; Zakai, 2018; Davis & Alexander, 2024).

Developing personal stance:

Through engaging with diverse perspectives and challenging questions, learners construct their own informed positions about Israel. Rather than inheriting others’ views wholesale, they develop personal frameworks for understanding Israel that reflect their values, experiences, and critical examination of evidence (Davis & Alexander, 2024, 2025; Reingold, 2022; Levisohn & Kelman, 2019).

Preparing for real encounters:

Students who practice discussing controversial topics in educational settings are better prepared (than those who do not) for challenging conversations in college, social settings, and online spaces. They have language, context, and confidence to engage rather than withdraw (Davis & Alexander, 2024; Kopelowitz, Ravid, Posklinsky, Golden, & Gillis, 2024; Zakai & Reingold, 2024).

Developing nuanced understanding:

Exploring difficult questions helps learners move beyond simplistic narratives to understand Israel as a complex society. They learn to hold tensions: appreciating achievements while acknowledging problems and feeling connection while recognizing disagreement (Reingold, 2018; Zakai, 2014; Pomson & Held, 2012; Weissman, 2017; Davis & Alexander, 2024, 2025).

FOUNDATION 7:

Cumulative Effect Across Educational Settings

Overview

Learners encounter Israel education across multiple settings throughout their lives—day schools, supplementary schools, camps, youth movements, family programs, and travel experiences. When these different settings align their approaches and build on each other's work, learners experience a coherent educational journey rather than disconnected fragments.

The cumulative effect of experiences across settings creates an impact that exceeds the sum of individual programs (Kopelowitz, 2021b; Pomson, 2015; Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2010).

This coordination becomes particularly important during adolescence, when Israel experiences offer a critical pathway for Jewish connection. Travel, service learning, and peer-based experiences can strengthen Jewish engagement when they connect to broader opportunities for meaning-making and community belonging outside of the experience. Without this integration, powerful individual experiences may fail to create lasting change in young people's Jewish lives (Bryfman, 2016).



The cumulative effect develops both within and across settings, as follows.

Within Single Institutions: Learners encounter Israel through different subjects, teachers, and events over many years. These experiences may reinforce and build upon each other, or they may remain disconnected. When staff share educational values, vision and mission and develop a common language that each applies to their area of expertise, they create a coherent values-informed environment across different subjects, times, and spaces (Pomson et al., 2014; Kress, 2012).

Across Multiple Settings: Children might first encounter Israel through songs and stories in preschool, deepen their connection through relationships with Israeli counselors at camp, be challenged to think critically in their teen youth group, and engage with uncomfortable questions on a high school trip. Youth movements function as crucial bridges in this educational ecosystem by often connecting experiences from schools, camps, and travel programs. A teen might first encounter Israel through school curriculum, deepen engagement through movement activities, and culminate his or her learning on a movement-sponsored Israel trip. Research on youth movement Israel tours has demonstrated this cumulative effect; participants have credited these trips as transformative precisely because they build on years of movement-based Israel education rather than standing alone (Miller, 2014). This scaffolding across settings helps explain why movement alumni maintain stronger Israel connections than peers who have similar but disconnected educational experiences (Kopelowitz, 2021b; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Cohen, 2018).

The Power of Accumulation: In addition, learners who experience Israel education across multiple settings develop more layered or sophisticated understanding than those with exposure in only one context. Each setting contributes different dimensions: Camps provide emotional connection through an immersive community, schools offer systematic knowledge building, youth movements enable peer leadership and activism, and travel programs create a direct encounter with Israeli society (Reingold & Rosen, 2025; Pomson, Wertheimer, & Hachohen-Wolf, 2014; Saxe et al., 2017; Cohen, 1995).

Key Findings

Building on previous learning:

When learners experience consistent messages and mutually reinforcing approaches across different settings, each experience deepens rather than restarts their learning journey. Programs that explicitly connect to learners' previous experiences show strong outcomes. Learners then see their Jewish education as one coherent story rather than as disconnected chapters (Saxe et al., 2017; Cohen & Kopelowitz, 2015).

Creating shared language:

Settings that develop common vocabulary, reference similar narratives, and use compatible frameworks help learners transfer learning across contexts. This shared language enables learners to recognize connections between different experiences, thereby making each new encounter feel familiar rather than foreign (Grant et al., 2013; Chazan et al., 2013).

Leveraging institutional strengths:

The cumulative effect works best when each setting contributes its unique capabilities—camps fostering emotional connection, schools building knowledge, or Israel programs fostering relationships—while maintaining awareness of the larger journey. Learners then receive the best each setting can offer as part of an integrated whole (Reingold & Rosen, 2025; Kopelowitz, 2021b).

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: Leveraging Unique Strengths



Different educational settings reveal both universal patterns and context-specific adaptations in implementing the seven foundations.

Before exploring each setting, it is worth noting that research demonstrates that **teacher authenticity—across settings—functions as an “invisible curriculum” through which students absorb not just what is taught transparently but also how it is embodied. Teachers with firsthand Israel experiences (e.g., travel, Hebrew fluency, or interpersonal relationships) create classrooms where Israel feels dynamic and meaningful, whereas those lacking strong connections often default to superficial presentations or avoid challenging topics** (Winer, 2019). The productive role of teacher experience with Israel highlights the critical importance of supporting teachers’ own Israel journeys through professional development programs, subsidized travel, and reflective pedagogical training.

Day Schools: Building Understanding Year by Year

Day schools possess unique advantages for Israel education through daily attendance over many years that creates opportunities to build Israel education systematically and with sequenced layers of knowledge acquisition and experience. Their structure allows different approaches to complement each other: Individual lessons, trips, yearly holidays, and commemorations work together to comprise the long arc of a student’s entire school experience. Moreover, daily immersion in a structured environment allows schools to weave Israel into education rather than limiting it to special, isolated moments while also fostering natural integration in which Hebrew phrases label classroom objects, Israeli music plays between classes, and current events from Israel appear in social studies. When done well, Israel becomes as natural a part of school as math or science rather than something students encounter only during special programs (Kopelowitz, 2009; Avidar, 2016; Sinclair, 2013; Pomson et al., 2014).

Early complexity and cumulative learning:

Day schools work powerfully through developmental progression by building understanding step by step and following a traditional spiral. In elementary school, students might explore “different kinds of Israelis” through children’s books and video calls with Israeli classes. Middle schoolers can examine how Israel’s diverse populations view the same events differently. By high school, students engage with difficult questions about conflict, diversity, and competing narratives—wrestling with gaps between their earlier, simpler understanding and Israel’s complex realities. When done well, each year builds on the prior one, thereby helping students develop increasingly sophisticated thinking (Reingold, 2017; Zakai, 2011; Pomson et al., 2014).

Natural integration:

Schools that employ coordinators who have both the authority to make changes and the knowledge to inspire others can lead Israel integration in schools. When these coordinators help general studies teachers incorporate Israel into their subjects and design Israel trips that connect to years of learning rather than stand alone, the impact multiplies. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts (Grinfas-David, 2019; Kress, 2012; Pomson & Deitcher, 2010; Pomson et al., 2009). It is worth noting that schools benefit from a process of institutional readiness when they employ such individuals (and when they launch comprehensive Israel education initiatives), including staff alignment and community support.

Summer Camps: Living Jewish Life with Israel at the Center

Somewhat uniquely, at camp, Israel becomes part of communal living rather than a separate subject area. This happens through three intertwined pedagogies: its immersive environment (“ambient Israel education”), formal programs related to Israel, often led by campers, and Israelis engaged as peer campers, counselors, and specialists. Together, these three strategies comprise camp’s strengths in Israel education (Reingold & Rosen, 2025).

Ambient Israel education:

The 24/7 immersive environment of camps surrounds campers with learning opportunities. Campers wake to Israeli music, eat Israeli breakfast foods, play Israeli games during free time, and sing Israeli songs at campfires. Environmental design reinforces these connections through Israeli flags, maps, and cultural artifacts that appear throughout camp spaces, while Hebrew phrases label common areas and activities. This constant exposure creates familiarity that makes Israel feel like a natural part of Jewish experience rather than a distant concept; this naturalness results from deliberate educational design and intentional programming choices (Reingold & Rosen, 2025; Sinclair, 2009; Lainer-Vos, 2014).

Relationship-centered learning:

Israeli staff are an impactful element of camp-based Israel education. Living with Israeli counselors creates organic relationships through daily interactions, from helping homesick campers to celebrating birthdays together. These staff members often become big siblings rather than teachers, and friendships can continue on social media long after summer ends. Israeli counselors serve multiple educational functions simultaneously: providing authentic language immersion, sharing contemporary Israeli culture, representing the diversity of Israeli society, and creating personal connections that make Israel tangible to campers (Wolf & Kopelowitz, 2003; Aharonov, 2015; Wolf, 2010).

Learner agency through peer leadership:

Camp structures reveal distinctive opportunities for learner ownership through peer leadership. Older campers lead Israel activities for younger ones, design their own Israel programs, and choose specialized tracks to explore aspects that interest them. Teen leadership programs particularly emphasize camper-created content, in which participants teach each other about Israel connections they’ve discovered. This peer education model offers benefits for both teachers and learners, with teen leaders developing a deep understanding through teaching, while younger participants relate better to teen role models than to adult instructors (Bryfman, 2009; Aharon & Pomson, 2018).



Supplementary Schools: Making Every Minute Count

Supplementary schools must maximize their time through focused strategies and family partnerships (Joseph, 1997). In particular, **those connected to synagogues are able to weave connection to and celebration of Israel throughout synagogue life, thereby embedding Israel in worship through prayers for Israel during services, engaging students in community celebrations, and facilitating family programs during which parents and children explore Israeli culture together through cooking, music, and storytelling. This integration makes Israel feel like a natural part of Jewish life rather than a special topic and creates experiences in which children encounter Israel as part of their Jewish rhythm rather than as a separate subject for study** (JESNA/ Lippman Kanfer Institute, 2008; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2009; Sales et al., 2010; Winer, 2019).

Inside of the schools, successful supplementary programs recognize that their structural constraints—with relatively low budgets and learning hours—require strategic focus rather than comprehensive coverage. Schools that work effectively within these limits prioritize depth over breadth and make value-driven trade-offs that safeguard Israel as a core theme while investing in leadership capacity and family partnership (Wertheimer, 2009; Holtz, 1993). Such depth opportunities include month-long residencies, during which Israeli musicians spend extended periods of time teaching songs while sharing personal stories. Opportunities also include virtual sister-school exchanges, in which video connections with Israeli schools become ongoing friendships through which students celebrate birthdays together across continents, and weekly Israeli mentoring, during which teen emissaries regularly work with students and share contemporary Israeli perspectives through casual conversations (Winer, 2019). In some programs, learners shape their own Israel exploration, and ownership and engagement deepen significantly: older students might design programs for younger ones, students might choose which aspects of Israeli society to investigate based on personal interests, and learners are able to express their connection through various, personal modalities—writing, art, music, social action, or digital creation (Kopelowitz & Pitkowsky, 2024).

Core Jewish values, such as justice, peace, and mutual responsibility, provide a strong foundation for Israel education in supplementary schools. Students explore these concepts through Jewish texts and traditions before examining how they play out in contemporary Israel. This approach provides ethical grounding that helps learners navigate difficult questions while maintaining connection to Jewish wisdom and Israeli society. When students discuss current Israeli challenges through these value lenses, they develop sophisticated thinking and not simplistic positions (Kopelowitz & Pitkowsky, 2024). The values-based approach becomes particularly important given the diverse family attitudes toward Israel that supplementary schools must navigate (Joseph, 1997), and values can become a common framework that sustains dialogue while maintaining attachment (Grant & Kopelowitz, 2009).



Youth Movements: Ideological Communities for Israel Engagement

Zionist youth movements offer unique advantages through their combination of peer leadership, ideological framework, and year-round engagement that spans multiple years. **Unlike episodic programs, movements create sustained communities in which Israel serves as both educational content and organizing principle. Members negotiate complex identity formations—balancing national, Jewish, and, in some movements, Zionist commitments—with Israel as the integrating factor** (Kegel, 2003). This ideological coherence, which is maintained through global movement networks while adapting to local contexts, provides consistent Israel engagement from childhood through young adulthood (Cohen, 2009). Research on movement alumni has demonstrated exceptionally strong lifelong Israel attachment that far exceeds rates found among demographically similar peers who lack movement experience (Cohen, 2018; Miller, 2014).

Movements weave Israel into year-round activities—study sessions on Israeli politics, use of Israeli music and song, integration of Hebrew phrases, celebrations of Israeli holidays, and activism campaigns. This constant presence makes Israel feel like a natural component of Jewish life as opposed to a special topic (Cohen, 2009). Movement-sponsored Israel trips serve as capstone experiences within this integrated approach; participants have credited these journeys as transformative precisely because they culminate years of sustained engagement (Miller, 2014).

The movement model positions teens as educators and organizers and not recipients. **When members lead Israel programs for younger participants, they deepen their own understanding while modeling engaged citizenship for peers. This peer-led model makes Israel education more engaging and participatory, thereby ensuring that Israel is encountered not only as a topic of study but also as a lived value** (Cohen, 2018; Miller, 2014). This combination of ideological framing and youth-led activism creates educational impact that persists decades after formal participation ends (Cohen, 2018).

Moreover, youth movements create multigenerational communities where Israel connections pass from older to younger members through mentorship and shared experiences. These peer relationships, which are formed around shared Israel engagement, persist long after formal movement participation ends (Cohen, 2018; Miller, 2014). The sustained nature of these communities, which often span from childhood through young adulthood, allows for developmental progression in Israel engagement that episodic programs cannot replicate (Kegel, 2003; Cohen, 2009).



Educational Travel: Intensive Encounters That Transform

Israel travel programs offer unique advantages through intensive, immersive encounters that compress learning into concentrated periods. The physical journey to Israel itself marks these experiences as special and creates psychological openness to transformation. Travel’s intensity—24/7 immersion over weeks or months—enables depth that is impossible to achieve in weekly educational settings. **When participants stand where historical events occurred, walk through contemporary Israeli neighborhoods, and meet diverse Israelis, abstract concepts become lived experiences. Group dynamics during travel create powerful peer learning environments in which participants process experiences together and form bonds that often persist long after programs end.** When participants hike through desert landscapes while learning about water scarcity, abstract policy discussions become felt realities experienced through thirst and exhaustion. This multidimensional approach proves powerful because each element reinforces others: emotional intensity gains deeper meaning through human relationships, and physical experiences become educational through guided reflection (Kelner, 2010; Saxe et al., 2017; Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Abramson, 2017; Rosov Consulting, 2024b).

How Foundations Manifest: Engaging Layers Through Relationships

Travel transforms abstract issues into human encounters. Rather than reading about Israeli society, participants encounter it by staying with host families in different communities, meeting soldiers and conscientious objectors, visiting Arab and Jewish neighborhoods, and more. Personal relationships provide emotional scaffolding for engaging difficult questions; participants have reported greater willingness to explore challenging topics, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when they know real people affected by these issues (Sasson et al., 2011; Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997).

Effective travel programs allow participants to select focus areas, choose discussion topics, and pursue personal interests instead of following predetermined itineraries. Some participants explore Israel’s technological innovations, while others investigate social justice initiatives. Some focus on religious practice, while others examine secular culture. This agency extends beyond program design to include how participants process and share their experiences (Aaron, 2015).

Programs that connect Israel experiences with Jewish holiday celebrations, Hebrew language use, and text study create more integrated understanding than those that present Israel as an isolated topic. **When participants celebrate Shabbat in Jerusalem, study Talmud in ancient study houses, or speak Hebrew with Israeli peers, isolated tourism is replaced with Israel’s integration into organic practice.** Effective programs explicitly link travel experiences with Jewish learning, community involvement, and Israel engagement opportunities available in participants’ home communities (Cohen, 2002; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002; Rosov Consulting, 2018).

Short-term Israel trips for Jewish educators can transform both personal identity and professional capacity when they are designed with intentional pedagogy, structured reflection, and post-trip application support. However, the sustainability of insights gained during intense travel experiences depends heavily on institutional support systems in home contexts. Without follow-up professional learning and administrative backing, even transformative educator experiences may fail to translate into classroom innovation (Kedar, 2011; Rosov Consulting, 2024b).



Short-term Israel trips for Jewish educators can transform both personal identity and professional capacity when they are designed with intentional pedagogy, structured reflection, and post-trip application support.



ISRAEL EDUCATION: A Field at an Inflection Point

The attack on October 7, 2023, and particularly the aftermath in North America, serve as a revealing lens through which to examine the state of Israel education.

Educators Over-Emphasizing “Love”

The post-October 7 period highlighted the critical importance of organizational leadership being willing to engage the challenges of Israel education directly as opposed to avoiding controversy. Leaders and actors who modeled clarity and commitment enabled their institutions to provide guidance that students needed during the crisis, while those who retreated from Israel topics (because, for example, of the lack of clear answers to the complexity of the moment) left learners without frameworks for processing challenging events (Grinfas-David, 2024).

The latter represent the large majority of frontline educators. The period revealed that, despite decades of conceptual advancement as to best practice, most Jewish educators continue operating without the tools they need. For the most part, those in classrooms and learning spaces lack confidence or are otherwise reluctant to directly discuss complex or controversial issues. Moreover, this tendency toward reluctance is shared by those who received formal training as Israel educators (Fraiman, 2024; Kopelowitz et al., 2024).



More specifically, educators generally follow one of three approaches regarding orientation to Israel (Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Kopelowitz, 2025b):

1. Solidarity-focused approach

The majority of educators continue operating within paradigms that have been dominant since Israel’s founding. They focus on fostering emotional attachment through celebration of achievements, cultural activities, and expressions of solidarity. These approaches emphasize Jewish unity and support for Israel while avoiding topics like the occupation, internal Israeli divisions, or Palestinian narratives. Students encounter Israel through Independence Day celebrations, cultural engagements, such as Israeli dancing, and stories of technological innovation, but they rarely engage with its complexities or contemporary challenges.

2. Critical approach

Some educators swing to the opposite extreme by focusing primarily on criticism without fostering emotional bonds, relevancy, or opportunities for meaning-making. These approaches may engage political complexities but fail to cultivate the connection and belonging that motivate sustained engagement with Israel and Jewish peoplehood.

3. Complexity approach

A minority of educators attempt to balance support for Israel with critical engagement with Israeli government policies; they tolerate or embrace a diversity of opinions and the holding of multiple, simultaneous truths. These educators help students navigate multiple narratives while maintaining connection to Israel and Jewish peoplehood.

The small minority of educators who attempt to integrate all three approaches—those who help students develop emotional connection while engaging difficult questions and fostering the ability to engage with complexity and controversy—remains an exception rather than the norm.



Expansion of Smart Practices

Since the events of October 7, increasing numbers of educators have brought Israel education into discussions about what it means to be Jewish, how to respond to antisemitism, and how to engage as citizens in the wider world. Moreover, educators' broader institutions have incorporated Israel across grades and subject areas, including content for younger learners previously considered "too young" (Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Rosov Consulting, 2025).

In addition, organizations across the Jewish educational spectrum are leaning into relationships with Israelis. In summer 2024, the presence of 3,100 Israeli staff across North American Jewish summer camps provided what educators called "living testimony"—immediate, personal narratives that made abstract concepts tangible and provided emotional anchoring and the ability of both Israelis and American learners to support one another (Reingold & Rosen, 2025; Kopelowitz et al., 2024).

Personal connections provide resilience that knowledge transmission alone cannot achieve. Students with prior relationships with Israelis (such as through camp relationships) have demonstrated greater capacity to navigate campus tensions and antisemitic encounters (Fishman, 2024).

Factors That Prevent Educational Excellence

As demonstrated so far, thought leaders since the 1990s have achieved near consensus about best practices in Israel education, namely: engaging multiple truths (or “complexity”), building relationships between Israeli and North American peers, and integrating Israel into daily Jewish life. The crisis after October 7 exposed the extent to which most Jewish educational settings continue operating without these best practices.

This disconnect between what the field knows works and what actually happens in classrooms, camps, and communities reflects not new challenges but persistent structural, pedagogical, and systemic barriers. Despite substantial investment in educator training and program development, these constraints have limited implementation of the seven foundations for decades—and these limitations are now made urgent and visible by contemporary events.



Structural Constraints: When Institutions Undermine Innovation

Bounded pluralism and competing pressures

The most significant barrier to implementing evidence-based practices emerges from **institutional structures that constrain pedagogical possibilities regardless of educator preparation or intention**. The post-October 7 period intensified these dynamics through the creation of “bounded pluralism”, or communities drawing hard limits around acceptable discourse during the crisis (Kopelowitz, 2024; Pomson et al., 2025). Even well-trained educators found themselves caught between competing pressures from supervisors, donors, parents, and participants, each of whom demanded different approaches to Israel education. When institutional cultures demand singular narratives, educators cannot confidently implement the complexity-based approaches that prove most effective (Kopelowitz, 2025; Fraiman, 2024; Davis & Alexander, 2024).

Resource disparities across educational settings

Resource disparities across settings create additional structural barriers. Day schools with daily contact and dedicated staff have fundamentally different capacities than supplementary schools with low budgets that meet for limited hours (Wertheimer, 2009; Grant, 2011; Holtz, 1993). **These disparities extend beyond time and money to include access to trained educators, family engagement capacity, and ability to create immersive experiences**. Geographic inequities compound these challenges; some communities have multiple well-resourced options, while others struggle to maintain basic programs (Billig, 2024; Kopelowitz et al., 2009).

Competition can prevent collaboration

Competition for limited resources forces institutions to prioritize immediate survival over collaboration or innovation. **When facing budget constraints and performance pressures, building connections with other settings or investing in long-term educator development become luxuries rather than priorities**. Each institution focuses on meeting its own goals instead of considering its role in the larger educational ecosystem, thereby perpetuating fragmentation that undermines cumulative impact (Billig, 2024; Pomson et al., 2009).

Lack of standards

Unlike other academic subjects, Israel education lacks consistent frameworks, learning objectives, and assessment criteria across institutions. **This nonstandardization impacts consistency, student outcomes, and educators’ ability to build on previous learning when students transfer between settings**. The absence of systematic approaches means that even well-intentioned programs may duplicate efforts or leave critical gaps in student understanding (Grinfas-David, 2012).

Pedagogical Challenges: The Complexity of Implementation

Educator preparation and confidence gaps

Beyond structural constraints, educators face significant challenges in translating theoretical insights into practice. Widespread gaps exist in educator preparation for introducing complex topics in developmentally appropriate ways (Davis & Alexander, 2024; Sinclair et al., 2013; Backenroth & Sinclair, 2014). **Many educators have reported feeling unprepared to facilitate controversial discussions, particularly when they have strong personal feelings or limited knowledge about specific topics.** Moving from traditional teaching approaches, in which educators direct learning, to facilitator roles, through which they guide learner exploration, requires fundamental pedagogical changes that many find challenging, especially when learners express views that conflict with institutional positions (Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Fraiman, 2024).



Developmental coherence and fragmentation

Creating developmental coherence presents another major challenge. Disconnects emerge between grade levels: elementary students might encounter Israel primarily through Hebrew class with Israeli teachers, while high school students study it in history class with American teachers. This fragmentation means learners experience disconnected fragments rather than a coherent journey (Avidar, 2016; Pomson, Deitcher, & Muszkat-Barkan, 2009). The challenge intensifies when trying to match complexity levels to developmental readiness—limited guidance exists on age-appropriate introduction of controversial topics, which leaves educators to navigate community expectations without clear frameworks (Zakai, 2022; Billig, 2024).

Creating multidimensional experiences

The difficulty of creating genuinely multidimensional experiences compounds these challenges. **Programs often face competing pressures that pull them toward single dimensions: Covering historical content pushes toward cognitive approaches and building solidarity pulls toward emotional programming, while hands-on activities are relegated to special events.** Creating integrated experiences in which thinking, feeling, and doing work together requires extensive planning, coordination, and educator versatility across domains—capabilities many settings struggle to develop (Kopelowitz, 2025b; Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Chazan et al., 2013; Golden, 2024; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2009). Measuring the impact of such integrated approaches proves more challenging than assessing discrete outcomes, which makes it difficult to demonstrate effectiveness to stakeholders who demand concrete results (Kopelowitz & Davis, forthcoming; Kopelowitz, 2013b; Horowitz, 2012).



Systemic Barriers: The Challenge of Cumulative Impact

Institutional silos and lost connections

At the systemic level, creating cumulative impact across independent institutions with different missions, funding sources, and educational philosophies presents enormous challenges. Each setting guards its independence and unique approach—schools, camps, and youth movements have different cultures, schedules, and priorities that resist coordination (Pomson, 2015). When learners move between settings, valuable information about their growth and connections gets lost, which forces each institution to start fresh rather than build on previous experiences. Moreover, learners who move between settings may encounter compatible educational philosophies. But without formal mechanisms for settings to build on each other's work, the potential for cumulative impact remains unrealized (Billig, 2024; iCenter, 2012).

The specialization paradox

The growth of trained Israel educators across Jewish institutions represents significant progress, yet this professionalization creates its own paradox. While many institutions now have access to Israel education expertise, the post-October 7 period revealed that other educators defer to the Israel specialist as “the expert” and don’t feel equipped to engage learners with Israel within their own subject areas (Kopelowitz et al., 2024; Fraiman, 2024). This creates islands of expertise rather than institution-wide capacity, thereby limiting the integration that is essential for effective practice (Kopelowitz, 2013a; Winer, 2023; Kopelowitz & Wolf, 2013b).



Critical Knowledge Gaps: What We Still Don't Know

Significant gaps in understanding compound these implementation challenges. Limited longitudinal tracking exists of how early complexity engagement affects adult connections to Israel, which leaves educators without evidence for long-term impact (Billig, 2024). Frameworks for understanding how digital natives process complexity differently than previous generations remain undeveloped despite the knowledge that contemporary learners expect to choose, curate, and personalize their learning in ways that challenge traditional pedagogical approaches (Davis & Kelman, 2025; Kelman et al., 2019).

The research has not explored learner perspectives on their own journeys, in their voices. Limited guidance exists on crisis pedagogy that maintains educational integrity while supporting emotional needs—a gap made painfully evident by October 7 (Zakai, 2022). Perhaps most critically, models for how institutions can collaborate to create cumulative impact while preserving the autonomy and creativity that makes each setting distinctive remain elusive.

From Barriers to Opportunities for Transformation

The barriers to educational excellence, while substantial and persistent, illuminate pathways for strategic intervention. Understanding where and why implementation fails provides essential guidance for the Reimagining Initiative and the broader field. The structural constraints, pedagogical challenges, and systemic barriers documented here are not immutable realities but rather pressure points that, if addressed with targeted investment and innovation, could yield significant change.

Emerging Models of Progress

Evidence of progress already exists in pockets throughout the field, which suggests that transformation is possible when conditions align.

Shared educational frameworks

The development of shared educational frameworks through organizations such as Makom, the iCenter, the Center for Israel Education (CIE), Pardes, Unpacked for Educators, and the Shalom Hartman Institute demonstrates that **common language and approaches can transcend institutional boundaries** (Sinclair, 2013; Mapping the Landscape, 2012). The founding of dedicated Israel education organizations in the mid-2000s heralded the growth of a cadre of Israel educators who now work across many Jewish educational institutions, including those who have created Birthright’s Institute for training “tour educators,” and approaches that now inform Jewish Agency shlichim training.

When educators from different settings—day schools, camps, supplementary schools, and Israel educational travel—undergo similar training through these various programs, they create an informal network of shared understanding. The iCenter’s iFellows program, for example, has trained hundreds of educators across diverse settings in approaches that emphasize complexity, relationships, and integration (Kopelowitz, 2013a; Kopelowitz & Wolf, 2013b). Similarly, the Shalom Hartman Institute’s programs provide educators with frameworks for engaging learners with Israel’s moral complexities while maintaining a generative relationship with Israel.

A learner moving from a school with an iCenter-trained educator to a camp with staff from similar programs encounters compatible approaches even without formal coordination. This shared preparation allows educators to speak the same educational language while applying it to their particular contexts. The impact extends beyond individual educators—when multiple staff members within an institution share this training, they create pockets of transformation that can influence institutional culture (Backenroth & Sinclair, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2013). Research on educator networks has revealed that these shared frameworks particularly benefit smaller institutions that lack resources for independent curriculum development by allowing them to access field-tested approaches and materials (Winer, 2023). The emergence of specialized Israel education as a professional field—with its own conferences, publications, and career pathways—represents a significant achievement in field-building that didn’t exist before the 2000s (Horowitz, 2012; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012).



Professional learning networks

Professional networks that connect educators across settings show how individual relationships can bridge the organizational silos that institutional structures maintain. Communities of practice that emerge through conferences, online forums, and collaborative projects enable educators to share resources, discuss challenges, and build on each other’s innovations (Winer, 2023; Kopelowitz, 2021b). These networks function as an informal infrastructure for cumulative learning, thereby partially compensating for the absence of formal coordination mechanisms between institutions.

The annual conferences of major national organizations enable day-school teachers, camp directors, and supplementary school educators to exchange insights across institutional boundaries (Billig, 2024). Online platforms have accelerated this knowledge sharing; educator Facebook groups, WhatsApp networks, and resource-sharing sites enable real-time collaboration that was impossible in previous generations (Kelman et al., 2019). **In the immediate aftermath of October 7, these networks proved essential—educators shared resources, processing strategies, and mutual support across geographic and institutional boundaries, thereby demonstrating the field’s capacity for rapid collective response when informal networks are activated.**

Regional collaboratives have emerged as particularly effective models for sustained professional learning. Cities like Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles have developed Israel education cohorts in which educators from different settings meet regularly to study together, share practices, and coordinate community-wide initiatives (Grant & Kopelowitz, 2009). These local networks create opportunities for learners to encounter consistent approaches as they move through different programs within their community, even when institutions don’t formally coordinate. The success of these collaboratives suggests that geographic proximity and face-to-face relationships remain powerful factors in building educational coherence despite the growth of digital connectivity (Pomson, 2015).



Bidirectional learning with Israel

The parallel development of peoplehood education in Israel offers an instructive model for overcoming fragmentation. This approach integrates Israel-Diaspora relationships into organizational culture rather than treating them as separate subjects, thereby demonstrating that educational transformation can occur through cultural shift rather than programmatic addition (Kopelowitz & Franco Galor, 2024, 2025b). While still a nascent movement, there are increasing numbers of Israeli educational institutions that recognize that engaging with global Jewry enriches Israeli students' Jewish identification and challenges insular perspectives (Kopelowitz, 2003b; Ravid, 2021; Mittelberg, 2010).

Israeli educators who are working to connect their students with global Jewish communities face similar challenges of complexity, relationships, and integration—their solutions provide valuable insights for North American contexts. This bidirectional learning extends to crisis response as well. **After October 7, Israeli educators shared strategies for helping students process trauma and maintain hope during conflict, while Diaspora educators contributed approaches for navigating hostile environments and maintaining Jewish pride in minority contexts** (Reingold & Rosen, 2025; Rosov Consulting, 2025). The

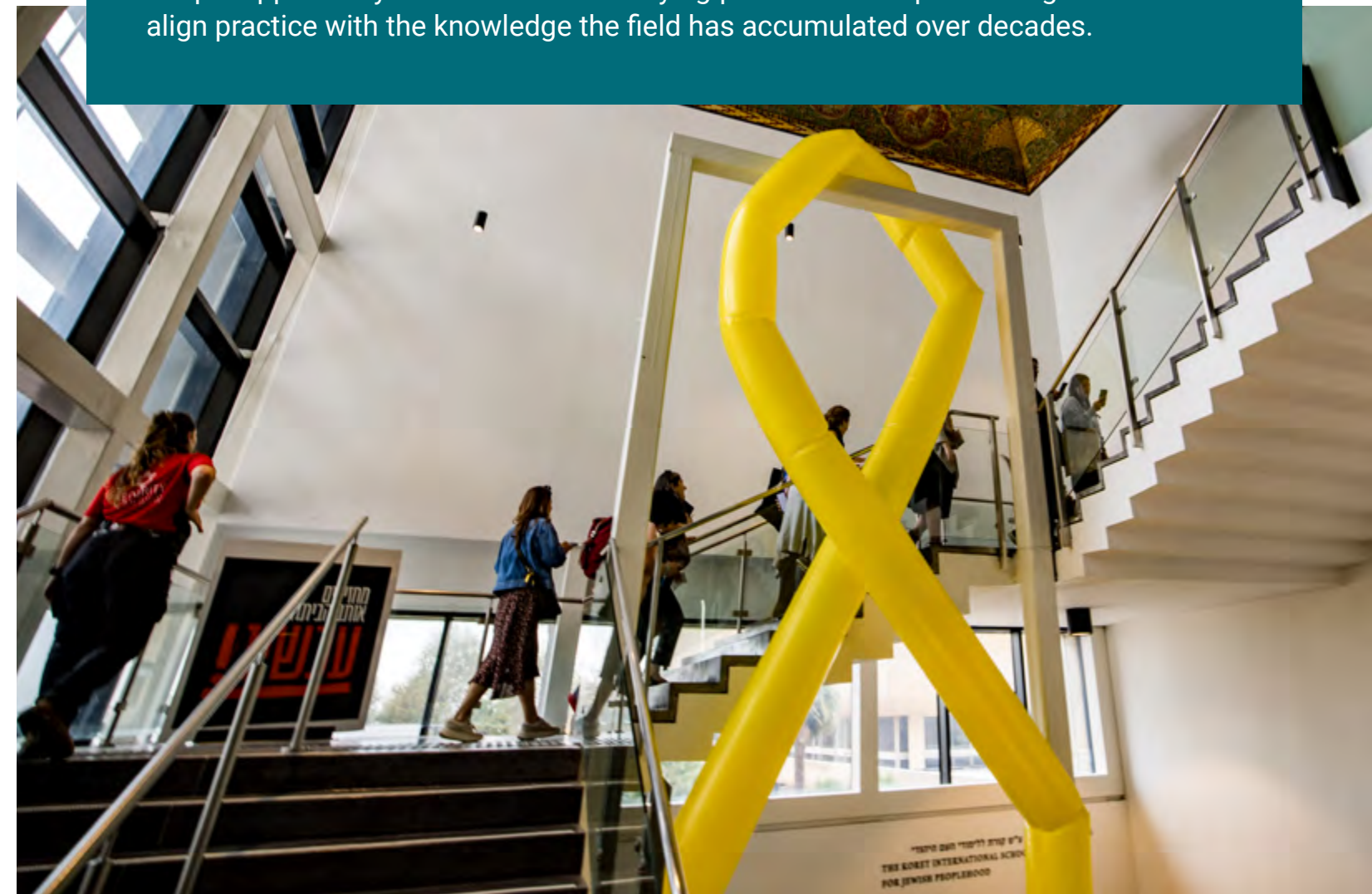
exchange revealed complementary strengths—Israeli educators bring lived experience with complexity and resilience, while Diaspora educators offer expertise in pluralistic pedagogy and identity formation in multicultural settings (Ben-David & Hacoheh Wolf, 2018).

The growing number of Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) in North American educational settings represents another dimension of this exchange. These educators bring not just Israeli perspectives but also increasingly sophisticated training in understanding and working with Jewish communities outside Israel, including knowledge of diverse Jewish movements, pluralistic approaches to Jewish practice, and pedagogical methods suited to minority community contexts (Aharonov, 2015). **When shlichim return to Israel, they carry back insights about Diaspora Jewish life that influence Israeli educational approaches, thereby creating a feedback loop that enriches both communities** (Ezrachi & Sutnick, 1997). This circulation of educators and ideas represents an emerging strength that could help address the specialization paradox, in which Israel education becomes isolated within institutions rather than permeating educational culture.

Beyond Incremental Change

The persistence of these challenges despite decades of effort indicates that incremental adjustments will not suffice to address them. The gap between the seven foundations articulated in this review and actual practice suggests that transformation requires fundamental shifts in how institutions conceptualize their role in learners' cumulative Jewish educational journeys. Rather than viewing each setting as an independent provider of Israel education, the field needs frameworks that position schools, camps, supplementary programs, travel experiences, and other educational encounters as interconnected components of a larger educational ecosystem.

The aftermath of October 7—as it has manifested in North American Jewish education—has created both urgency and opportunity. The inadequacy of current approaches has become undeniable and has created openness to change that did not exist before. At the same time, the crisis has demonstrated the consequences of leaving these barriers unaddressed—educators unprepared for complexity, learners lacking frameworks for processing difficult realities, and institutions unable to provide the sophisticated approaches their communities desperately need. This moment of recognition offers a unique opportunity to move from identifying problems to implementing solutions that align practice with the knowledge the field has accumulated over decades.



Israel as the Catalyst for Jewish Educational Transformation

The seven foundations collectively reveal how Israel education serves as a powerful driver for broader Jewish educational excellence. This catalytic effect operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms that this review of the Israel education literature illuminates.



Relevance and Immediacy

Israel provides a contemporary lens through which ancient Jewish texts and traditions become immediately relevant. When learners engage with modern Israeli society wrestling with biblical values, Talmudic principles come alive. The State of Israel offers a living laboratory where Jewish ethics meet real-world challenges, thereby transforming abstract concepts into tangible dilemmas that demand engagement.

Motivation Through Connection

The relationships formed through Israel education—with Israeli peers, educators, and communities—create emotional investment that motivates broader Jewish learning. Students who care about Israeli friends want to master Hebrew to communicate better. Those who've celebrated holidays in Jerusalem seek deeper understanding of their meaning. The personal connections forged through Israel education become the emotional scaffolding that supports continued Jewish engagement.

Skill Transfer Across Domains

The capacities developed through quality Israel education transfer directly to other areas of Jewish learning. Students who learn to hold Israel's complexities develop skills for engaging with contradictions in Jewish texts. Those who navigate multiple Israeli narratives become better equipped to appreciate diverse Jewish practices. The critical thinking, moral reasoning, and comfort with complexity gained through Israel education enhance engagement with all aspects of Jewish tradition.

Agency and Ownership Models

When learners successfully direct their own Israel education—choosing what to explore, how to engage, and what meaning to make—they develop a template for active Jewish engagement. This ownership model transforms their relationship with Jewish learning from passive reception to active creation, thereby establishing patterns that persist throughout their Jewish journey.

Integration as Paradigm

Perhaps most significantly, when Israel education is successfully integrated into daily Jewish life rather than compartmentalized, it demonstrates how Jewish learning can permeate all aspects of experience. This integration model—in which Israel appears naturally in Hebrew study, prayer, holiday celebrations, and ethical discussions—provides a blueprint for holistic Jewish education that refuses artificial boundaries between subjects.

The research thus reveals that effective Israel education doesn't compete with other Jewish learning priorities but rather enhances them all. When implemented through these seven foundations, Israel education becomes the driver that makes Hebrew meaningful, prayer relevant, ethics tangible, and Jewish community vital. The challenge for the field is not choosing between Israel education and other Jewish learning but recognizing how Israel education, properly conceived and implemented, strengthens every aspect of a Jewish educational endeavor.

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