

Navigating Language and Identity: Exploring Hebrew Learning, Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation, and Jewish Community Connection

By Toby Kaplowitz

Abstract

This dissertation explores the lived experiences of children who struggle with Hebrew literacy, seeking to understand how they, their parents, and their educators navigate the high-stakes intersection of academic skill and communal belonging. Through semi-structured interviews, my research identified a central protective strategy I call the "firewall effect"—an emotional and experiential barrier built primarily by the home to protect a child's positive identity from the academic frustration of the classroom.

I found that this "firewall" is maintained by the "unseen labor" of parents, a set of invisible, high-effort strategies (like managing tutors and advocating for accommodations) that often go unrecognized by the school. This creates a "two-population disconnect," in which educators, observing their general parent body, are structurally blind to the hyper-committed efforts of the parents I interviewed. This disconnect creates a high-stakes crisis at key moments like the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a "precise point of vulnerability," and the "counseling out" dilemma, which risks being perceived as a communal rejection.

This study reframes the problem from one of pedagogy to one of identity. It concludes with an urgent call for a "connection-first" model of Jewish education, recommending "ethical exit protocols" and strategies to make parental "unseen labor" a visible, valued part of the educational partnership.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of these children, their parents, and their educators. I sought to identify the specific strategies families use to protect their children's connection to Judaism and the institutional barriers they face.

This study was guided by the following central research questions:

1. How do children with Hebrew reading challenges describe their Jewish identity and sense of belonging?
2. What strategies do parents and educators use to support these children's Jewish connection, and what are the goals of these strategies?
3. How do the "high-stakes" moments of Jewish education, particularly the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, impact these children's feelings of competence and belonging?

4. What is the lived experience of the parent-educator disconnect and the counseling out dilemma for families and school staff?

Conceptual Framework

To analyze these experiences, this study introduces several key conceptual frameworks that emerged from the data. The primary framework is the firewall effect, a term I use to describe the emotional and experiential barrier built primarily by parents to protect a child's positive Jewish identity from their academic struggles. This firewall is reinforced by the relational safe spaces created by tutors and other educators.

This protection is often accomplished through what I call unseen labor, the invisible, high-effort work of parents to create a safe and personalized Jewish education for their child outside the school's mainstream model. Finally, this study analyzes the two-population disconnect to explain the systemic gap in perception between educators (commenting on their general parent body) and the highly-committed parents I interviewed.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it provides a much-needed, non-judgmental language for parents and educators to discuss a deeply emotional problem. By identifying and naming the firewall and unseen labor, this study gives voice to the experiences of families who often feel misunderstood. The findings offer a path forward for schools, synagogues, and families to create a more inclusive, connection-first model of Jewish education that prioritizes belonging as its foundation, not its byproduct.