

Catching Them Before They Fall: The Benefits of Early
Intervention for Children with Language-Based Learning
Disabilities in Orthodox Jewish Schools

Presented to the S. Daniel Abraham Honors Program
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Completion of the Program

Stern College for Women
Yeshiva University
April 28, 2022

Lauren Borenstein

Mentor: Neva Goldstein Hellman, MA, CCC-SLP

Introduction

Throughout Jewish history, Jewish education reforms have been a vehicle utilized by Jewish leaders to combat the trend of Jewish youth veering from their faith. In the early 1900's, Polish Jewry was in danger due to the lack of Jewish education for Orthodox women. The threat to the Jewish community troubled Sarah Schenirer, so she started a Jewish education center for Orthodox women, "Bais Yaakov," in order to stem the downward trend. She was extremely successful, and today there are multiple Bais Yaakov schools all over the world that offer enriching Jewish and general education to Orthodox women (Weissman, 2021).

Jewish schools around the world teach Hebrew language, with their ultimate goal similar to that of Sarah Schenirer: To strengthen students' Jewish identity (Avni, 2012; Goldberg, 2004). There is mounting evidence that for some Jewish students—in particular, students with language-based learning disabilities (LBLD), including dyslexia—who struggle to learn Hebrew, the goal of strengthening their Jewish identity through learning Hebrew is not met. In fact, the opposite occurs, and these students experience feelings of marginalization from the Jewish community (Goldberg, 2004). The concern is that these students will ultimately abandon their faith community all together.

This paper discusses the heightened difficulty children with LBLD have had learning Hebrew, and the resulting impact their intense struggle has had on their Jewish identity formation. A discussion of potential language intervention techniques follows, and a study involving early identification and intervention is proposed to gauge if these techniques might improve the students' access to Hebrew and, in turn, reverse the unfortunate trend of Jewish children with LBLD abandoning their community and the belief system of their ancestors.

Hebrew Language in Schools

Many Jewish day schools in America, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, where English is the students' first language and Hebrew is a second language, follow a "dual curriculum," in which Judaic studies are taught in tandem with general education courses, such as mathematics and English language arts. Rigorous Jewish studies classes focus on Jewish ritual, texts, history, and ideas, and many of the learning materials are presented in Hebrew. This mode of parallel learning, with emphasis on developing bilingualism with a sacred second language, allows students to build personal connections with their faith through its primary language of transmission (Avni, 2012; Goldberg, 2004). Effective Hebrew language education in Jewish day schools, therefore, allows individuals to utilize Hebrew in various contexts throughout their lives.

Avni (2012) conducted fieldwork in a (non-Orthodox) Jewish day school in order to determine the impact Hebrew language learning has on students' connection to their Jewish heritage and identity. About the day school, she writes, "the Hebrew language and Jewish studies curriculum was firmly rooted in the centuries-old tradition of teaching Hebrew (in all of its varieties) as a means of transmitting Jewishness (a cultural/social sense of selfhood and collectivity) as well as Judaism (a religious community)" (Avni, 2012, p. 327). The goal of teaching Hebrew in Jewish classes was to both reinforce and strengthen a child's Jewish identity. Avni (2012) observed that the use of Hebrew in this school was both religious and cultural: It aided the students in making sense of their Jewish identities and Jewish practices in addition to differentiating them from other people and religions.

The students in Avni's (2012) study viewed their Hebrew education as an indicator of the "Jewishness" of their school. At times, teachers used Hebrew to reprimand students in order to constitute "certain acts as Jewish with all its moral loadings" (Avni, 2012, p. 328). Hebrew was also used to bring a sense of "insiderness and cohesiveness" (Avni, 2012, p. 329), and create a community. Students noted that learning Hebrew made them feel "one with the Jewish people" (Avni, 2012, p. 329). Avni's findings support the idea that the purpose of Hebrew instruction in Jewish day schools is to connect the students to their religious, or faith, identity.

Similarly, Goldberg (2004) notes that, "Hebrew language is a major source of Jewish identity" and serves as a connector to the group as a whole and "to the community's rich history of 3,000 years" (Goldberg, 2004, pp. 34–35). Referring to Vygotsky's (1978) framing of the subject, Goldberg (2004) describes that Hebrew literacy serves as the vehicle for communal continuity. Jewish texts are studied and Jewish prayers are recited in Hebrew, so that there is significant cultural knowledge and use of Hebrew in the Jewish community. Hebrew is, therefore, taught in schools starting from a young age, to equip the students with the tools to participate in personal and communal religious activities.

Avni (2012) supports Goldberg's (2004) findings that teaching Hebrew in Jewish schools has a purpose larger than fulfilling a second-language requirement: Hebrew is taught in Jewish day schools to create a sense of Jewish identity and communal belonging.

Religious Identity and Academic Success

While Avni (2012) and Goldberg (2004) draw a connection between Hebrew language learning in Jewish day schools and one's Jewish identity, Horwitz (2022) explores the impact of a religious upbringing on academic success for Christian students in public schools. Horwitz (2022) brings data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, National Student Clearinghouse, and National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health to connect religious engagement and academic outcomes. Her focus group consisted of children from deeply religious Christian families, for whom religion impacts all aspects of their lives. In this population, students from low socioeconomic status families are not expected to finish high school, while students from higher socioeconomic status homes are expected to graduate from high school and attend selective colleges. Two students that did not fit this trajectory told Horwitz that they orient their lives around God and “[live] in the way that He would want [them] to” (Horwitz, 2022, p. 9). One boy from a lower-socioeconomic home finished high school, while one girl, from a higher-income family, graduated from high school as expected, but did not choose to attend a selective college. These students attributed their academic success and decisions to religion and their deep connection with God (Horwitz, 2022).

Although on the surface religious teenagers of different genders, races, social class backgrounds, and religious traditions seem very different, one thing they all share is that they are all “religiously restrained,” as Horwitz (2022) describes them, which means that they navigate their lives based on the respective religious beliefs passed down to them by their parents. Horwitz labels these teens “abiders,” adolescents who are intensely religious. Their connection and drive to please God shapes their self-concept, the way they carry themselves, and the way they imagine their future (Horwitz, 2022).

Religious institutions have programs for members of all ages, which foster children's learning and focus on making them active contributors to the community as opposed to passive participants at a young age. Abiders learn to be religious by "observing and pitching in, not by explicit instruction" (Horwitz, 2022, p. 28). These children make a conscious decision to actively embrace religious restraint for themselves, which is crucial when it comes to religion's role in shaping behavior (Horwitz, 2022).

Similar to Jewish religious and educational institutions that work parallel one another to emphasize the importance of building personal religious connections, Christian religious institutions and public schools hold similar ideals that promote academic advantage to abiders. Each school has its own set of rules, but they all serve the purpose to teach students to "respect rules in general and develop the habit of self-control necessary for adulthood" (Horwitz, 2022, p. 52). Conscientiousness and cooperation are part of abiders' self-concepts because of their knowledge and connection to biblical texts and their view of "God as the ultimate authority" (Horwitz, 2022, p. 54). The "abider advantage" is the idea that when a student succeeds in one institution, they will thrive in the other (Horwitz, 2022). In other words, a God-centered self-concept pushes students to exert effort, persevere, and orient their actions to classroom success.

Not only do abiders fare well in school because of their direct actions, they also refrain from risky behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use, a hindrance to academic success. By refraining from this behavior due to religious beliefs, abiders add to their academic advantage. According to their teachers, students with a God-centered self-concept have self control, become quiet when asked, do not act out, are kind, listen in class, work hard, and do not complain. These traits make teachers' jobs easier, so they reward abiders with high grades in order to reinforce

their good behavior. Regardless of what led to an abider's God-centered self-concept, they earn better grades than their non-abider peers (Horwitz, 2022).

A high grade point average (GPA) is one of the strongest predictors of post-high school success, which is commonly marked as college attendance and completion. Since teens raised with religious restraint earn high grades, they have high GPAs, which means they are more likely to attend more years of college. This sets them up for a more successful life, including higher income and health benefits (Horwitz, 2022).

According to Horwitz (2022), religion has a large impact on one's academic achievement. Deeply religious students make decisions driven by their faith that yield positive educational outcomes. Based on the argument of *God, Grades, and Graduation*, adolescents with deep religious connections are likely to excel in school (Horwitz, 2022).

While Horwitz's book makes compelling arguments about the positive impact religious upbringing has on adolescents' school success, she leaves out one group of core students—the growing population (Hutchins & Engels, 2005) of students with LBLD. She does not account for the academic challenges these students face and mainly focuses on other differences such as class, race, and gender.

Language-Based Learning Disability

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA website, *no date*) defines LBLD as developmental challenges that affect one's writing, reading, and spelling abilities in their native language. Children with LBLD have normal or above average intelligence, but

struggle with tasks such as learning new words, remembering details from a book or class discussion, telling left from right, matching sounds to letters, and more. Children with language impairments and concomitant struggles with morphology, or word formation, may have grammatical knowledge, but have an inability to use that knowledge successfully to communicate (Bishop, Nation, & Patterson, 2014).

Dyslexia is an LBLD characterized by weak phonological processing capabilities and, in turn, poor reading skills (Hogan, 2018). Phonological processing is the use of sounds from one's language to process spoken and written language (Wagner & Torgesen, 1987, cited by ASHA website). Students with dyslexia have difficulties with phonemic awareness, retrieving and processing linguistic information, working memory, metalinguistics (the relationship between language and behavior), and stabilizing sound-symbol relationships, all of which difficulties negatively impact their language learning (Simon, 2000). In the early grades, some students with dyslexia are able to compensate because of their high IQ, but dyslexia is a lifelong learning challenge (Simon, 2000) that poses different difficulties throughout life's many stages. Simon (2000) writes that "[w]hen one is dyslexic, there is always a gap between what one knows and what one can do" (p. 166). Dyslexia can inhibit one's ability to achieve certain skills despite a large knowledge base. Treating dyslexia involves intense word-reading instruction, and children with dyslexia often have comorbid speech, language, or executive functioning impairments (Hogan, 2018).

LBLD affects a student's academic outcomes, but can also have much larger ramifications. Earlier in the research conversation, it was theorized that anxiety caused difficulties in language learning, but research has more recently demonstrated that anxiety is a person's reaction to their existing difficulties, not the causal factor (Sparks, R. L., & Ganschow,

L., 1993). Students with learning disorders often experience stress, anxiety, social, emotional, and behavioral problems, and have adverse emotional outcomes due to their academic struggle (Johnson, 2017).

Second Language Learning and LBLD

There are many theories that propose a connection between one's acquisition of their native language and the ramifications of this process for one's ability to learn a second language. The Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) (Sparks, Ganschow, & Pohlman, 1989; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991) suggests that one's phonological coding, syntactic (word order), and semantic (word meaning) skills in their first language, serve as the foundation for second-language acquisition. One's weaknesses in their first language will interfere with their ability to learn a foreign language.

LBLD manifests differently in every person, but one's personal struggles in developing their first language will reoccur in their second language, and every student with LBLD will have individual needs for support as they approach learning a second language (Simon, 2000). Phonological and syntactic coding difficulties are the main setbacks that affect one's ability to grasp oral and written aspects of a second language (Simon, 2000; Sparks et al, 1993). Both first- and second-language learning require one to remember and utilize specific sounds and grammatical rules for future production, so that it has been noted that the similarities outweigh the differences between the two language learning experiences (Sparks et al, 1993).

Similarly, Adams Sanabria, Adelaida Restrepo, Walker, and Glenberg (2022) espouse the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979), which states that success in a second language is dependent on the development of language and literacy acquisition in the first language. Children learning a second language must, therefore, hone their language skills in English, their native language, to further succeed in learning other languages.

Simon (2000), a speech-language pathologist with dyslexia, delves into her educational journey as a person with dyslexia trying to learn a second language. She took French in college and fell in love with the language and French culture despite her challenges. Her specific struggles are with phonemic awareness, spelling and grammar rules, and using working memory to learn words. Because of her slow progress, she relates, she lacked confidence in her abilities. While students with dyslexia may feel discouraged from learning a second language, Simon (2000) reassures her readers that student aptitude does not determine ability to learn a second language; rather, the richness of the context and the teaching style have the potential to facilitate students with dyslexia to success. Simon (2000) tells teachers that students with LBLD will not learn the same way as typical students.

Hebrew as a Second Language

Hebrew and English have many differences, so that Hebrew is a difficult second language for typical English speakers to learn, and so much more so for English speakers with LBLD who have experienced difficulties learning their native English. For example, Hebrew has an entirely different symbol system from English's Roman alphabet, and punctuation marks, rather than letters, denote vowel sounds in Hebrew. The directionality of Hebrew is also different, as it is

read from right to left. Hebrew verbs are declined for gender, number, and tense, all reflected in morphology far more complex than English morphology.

Simon (2000), the speech-language pathologist with dyslexia, explains that one of her phonology struggles is with different symbol systems, such as Roman numerals. This manifestation of dyslexia would potentially impede her ability to acquire Hebrew symbols, as noted above. In addition, Simon (2000) shares that she has difficulty with morphology, such as marking tense and gender, which are, as mentioned, prominent in Hebrew, much more so than in English. Simon's lived experience corroborates LCDH (Sparks et al, 1989; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991) and the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979), that students with LBLD will, by definition, have difficulty learning to read and write in their first language, which difficulty will necessarily affect their ability to learn and grasp a second language.

Hebrew Learning Difficulties and One's Jewish Identity

As discussed above, Goldberg (2004) and Avni (2012) have found that Hebrew is a driving factor in the development of a student's Jewish identity, even for Americans learning Hebrew sequentially as a second language. Hebrew is taught in Jewish community schools from a young age, and members of these communities constantly utilize Hebrew in different contexts—religious, educational, and social—throughout their lives. The question that has compelled this research has been: *If a student struggles to learn Hebrew from a young age, will that student have a weakened Jewish identity and a lessened communal connection?*

Horwitz (2022) argues that a positive religious identity leads students to academic success, but her research excluded students with academic struggles, such as those with learning disabilities. Based on her work, the role of Hebrew in Jewish day schools (Avni, 2012; Goldberg,

2004), and the difficulties children with LBLD have learning a second language (Simon, 2000), it is hypothesized that children with LBLD in Jewish day schools who experience academic struggles will have less of a connection to their Jewish faith than their peers who do not have LBLD.

Like Avni (2012), Ross (2004) also listened to students' voices about their learning experiences in Jewish day school and interviewed four students with learning disabilities who had attended Jewish day school for 10 years. Ross (2004) discovered that although ostensibly one goal of Jewish education is to foster a child's sense of belonging to the community at large, in reality, the Jewish education system sends a contradictory message about inclusion. While promoting community and belonging on one hand, the rigorous and challenging academic program has not been welcoming for children with learning disabilities (Ross, 2004).

Ross (2004) citing Gutterman (1995) found that the students interviewed attributed most of their strong feelings about school to their teachers. One student said that because of his teachers he "know[s] a lot about Judaism" (Ross, 2004, p. 56), but with the right teacher, maybe he would *love* being Jewish and not just *know* about it. While the students claimed to have a Jewish identity, this student himself suggested that his Jewish identity could be much stronger with the help of kind, skilled educators. Further, the students assigned their negative self-image to their inability to read and understand Hebrew and follow along in class. One student added that the teacher yelled at him when he needed help with class material. Another student noted that "an effective teacher possesses both a positive attitude and sound teacher skills" (Ross, 2004, p. 54). Additionally, the students said that their teachers cared more about the curriculum than they cared about the students.

The students in Ross' (2004) study also reported being overwhelmed by the amount of information their brains were flooded with and felt an immense amount of academic pressure. They strongly credited the school (special education) support system as crucial to their academic success and for pushing them to achieve greatness. These students acknowledged, both directly and indirectly, that despite their academic struggles, because of their school's support team, they do feel that they have a Jewish identity (Ross, 2004).

Adding to the conversation about Jewish identity, Goldberg's (2004) study identified a connection between reading and behavior; specifically, students' inability to read English and Hebrew and behavioral problems in Modern Orthodox Jewish day schools. He discusses the impact community, family, and experience can have on an Orthodox male student's reading and behavioral outcomes. He found that poor academic achievement, lowered self-esteem, and exclusion from community are just a few effects of a reading disability that can lead to behavior problems. Goldberg claims that behavior problems can be exacerbated in an Orthodox Jewish community, "in which all members are expected to learn Hebrew, in addition to becoming literate in their first language" (Goldberg, 2004, p. 33). According to Goldberg (2004), those who do not have Hebrew reading proficiency may feel left out of literacy-based community activities—which are the overwhelming majority of Jewish practices—and feel marginalized from the community as a result.

Goldberg's (2004) study focused on a sample of 77 fifth graders, 16 English teachers, and 11 Hebrew teachers from nine Modern Orthodox Jewish day schools with a dual-language curriculum in the New York City metropolitan area. An array of tests and statistical analyses were performed for both the children and the teachers to measure each student's English and

Hebrew reading, decoding, and comprehension skills, behavior problems, stress levels, and social exclusion, and the effects that each of these factors have on each other.

Through his watershed research on the subject, Goldberg (2004) demonstrated that, compared to students with higher reading scores, students with lower scores in both English and Hebrew reading were reported to have higher levels of behavioral problems. Various tests and analyses showed that Hebrew decoding abilities were associated with feelings of social exclusion as perceived by the teachers, and even more so, by the students. The students who had a difficult time performing Hebrew reading tasks inside and outside the classroom felt excluded from the educational community and the Jewish community at large, including, but not limited to, communal prayer and study—core activities of daily Jewish life. When social exclusion was involved with Hebrew decoding abilities, aggressive behavior was seen more prominently than when that social exclusion was not a factor (Goldberg 2004).

In his later 2005 study, Goldberg drew a link between Hebrew reading difficulties and specific behavior patterns, such as aggression and rebellion against religious beliefs, and he discussed the effects of these on Jewish identity. Goldberg (2005) highlighted weak social cohesion, community isolation, and cognitive and language disabilities as risk factors for aggression and behavior problems. He reiterated that since engagement with the Hebrew language plays a large role in forging Jewish identity, someone who struggles learning Hebrew may feel like an outsider. A child who struggles with Hebrew language learning may feel excluded from communal events and prayer services, Jewish studies in school, and religious practices at home. According to Goldberg (2005), such marginalization and the concomitant feeling of rejection from the Orthodox community lead to aggressive behavior. In 2004, Goldberg had pointedly concluded that “marginalization experienced by children seems to be a

result of Hebrew decoding difficulties; such social exclusion may then lead to externalizing behavior problems” (Goldberg, 2004, p. 96).

According to studies done by Ross (2004) and Goldberg (2004), students in Jewish day schools that struggle academically, namely those with LBLD, will feel less of a connection to the Jewish faith than their peers who do not experience academic strains. Based on this finding, it is suggested that more can be done to identify and treat students with LBLD in order to strengthen their religious identities.

Intervention Methods

According to the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979), a student’s native language (L1) acquisition will impact their ability to learn a second language (L2). Additionally, according to the LCDH (Sparks et al, 1989; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991), a student’s phonological coding, syntactic, and semantic difficulties in their L1 will affect their ability to acquire an L2. Therefore, when teachers and clinicians focus on language interventions that strengthen first language skills, it is hypothesized that enhanced skills in L1 will, in turn, positively impact a struggling student’s ability to acquire an L2.

Based on the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins,1979), Adams Sanabria et al (2022) studied an intervention technique for children who are dual language learners and have difficulty with reading comprehension in English, their dominant language. The intervention, called EMBRACE (Enhanced Moved by Reading to Accelerate Comprehension in English) “is designed to improve comprehension by prompting children who speak more than one language

to simulate meaning while reading” (Adams Sanabria et al, 2022, p. 3). For the EMBRACE intervention, children must read along to a story on an iPad and perform active reading comprehension tasks, such as moving an object from one side of the screen to another. This form of activity was chosen because of the theory of reading comprehension based on embodied cognition (Barsalou, 1999; Gallese, 2007, 2008; Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg & Robertson, 2000; Zwaan & Taylor, 2006; cited by Adams Sanabria et al, 2022), which states that the motor, sensory, and emotional systems play significant roles in reading comprehension and language learning. Over time, the auditory areas responsible for processing spoken speech become linked to those responsible for identifying actions, which manifests very early in a child’s life (Adams Sanabria et al, 2022). In addition, it has been noted that there are significant relationships between children’s executive functioning skills and language skills (Bishop et al, 2014). The premise of EMBRACE is that through the executive and physical tasks the children must perform, their reading comprehension will improve (Adams Sanabria et al, 2022).

A group of 56 dual language learners ranging from second to fifth grade were chosen and an array of analyses were conducted to explore the efficacy of EMBRACE. Study results found that EMBRACE was *not* significant for overall skill improvement, but it was helpful with simple narratives with younger children that had weaker reading skills (Adams Sanabria et al, 2022).

Classroom Setting and Teacher Advice

Many intervention methods, like EMBRACE (Adams Sanabria et al, 2022), are suited to use in a one-on-one setting, as opposed to a large group. When teachers take students out of the classroom for individualized intervention, which is common for Hebrew reading support, the pullout may cause a child to feel excluded from his or her peers. Goldberg (2004) suggests that

professionals can facilitate a feeling of belonging in children with reading difficulties, and in turn lower their tendencies to rebel. While personal therapeutic settings are very important to a child's improvement, inclusive classrooms would avoid the pitfall of students feeling excluded by pullouts.

Hutchins and Engels (2005) propose methods to create an inclusive environment in foreign language classrooms. The Natural Approach (NA) is a teaching style in which students deduce grammar rules and vocabulary through communication exercises, and not through direct instruction. Using the NA, students learn important grammatical principles and vocabulary through context and communication exercises. While the NA to teaching foreign languages has been deemed successful in many classrooms, it has been proven difficult for the population of students with learning disabilities (Hutchins & Engels, 2005).

Hutchins and Engels (2005) propose three ways to make a classroom inclusive and the second language accessible for all learners. The first method they mention is to restructure the physical classroom. Students with learning difficulties should be placed in the front so they can more easily pay attention. Secondly, foreign language teachers must have the training and drive to teach students with different needs. Lastly, the lesson plan must be restructured to meet the needs of all students; for example, a day's instruction would consist of summarizing key points from the previous class, direct instruction of the new material, and an exercise to practice what is learned (Hutchins & Engels, 2005). While these methods are being written for foreign language departments in universities, the driving idea of classroom inclusivity is important for students in all grade levels.

In addition to the methods suggested by Hutchins and Engels (2005), Simon (2000) highlighted strategies for foreign language instructors who teach students with dyslexia. One

goal is that teachers should teach students *how* to learn, as opposed to just focussing on the subject. Teachers should also incorporate multisensory activities to aid in understanding, such as playing with blocks that represent letters or making charts. Early and continued support, a transformative factor for students with learning disabilities (Ross, 2004), should be provided for students, which will make them feel comfortable asking questions and give them opportunities to apply their knowledge. Simon (2000) further suggests that teachers should also create incentives for students to use the target language, such as a point system, and apply it to a variety of assignments. To encourage students with dyslexia to stay in class and succeed, teachers should have compensatory grading strategies, such as extra credit for meeting with a tutor or watching movies in the foreign language, and students with learning disabilities should not receive penalties. Lastly, teachers should do all they can to make learning a foreign language an attainable goal for all of their students with any needs they may have (Simon, 2000).

Sparks and Ganschow (1993) discuss ideas for remediation on a classroom level, which reinforces the idea of classroom inclusivity of Hutchins and Engels (2005). Foreign language teachers must focus on cognitive difficulties, such as challenges with phonology, syntax, and semantics, to account for students' difficulties learning the second language. These authors posit that teachers should pay close attention to students' phonological difficulties by using diagnostic techniques when they sense a deficit, and ultimately refer the student to a speech-language pathologist or psychologist for formal evaluation. If there is a student with phonological difficulties in the classroom, the teacher should utilize methods that focus on sounds and symbols of language and do all that can be done to facilitate the student's success. Lastly, foreign language teachers should utilize tests for foreign language aptitude to identify students who are at-risk for LBLD (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993).

Advice for Outside of Classroom

First and foremost, according to Johnson (2017), early identification of LBLD can help place a child on the path to success. A child's learning trajectory is greatly affected by early experiences, so professionals should strive to identify and intervene early in order to limit challenges a child with learning disabilities might have in the future. Johnson (2017) also writes that phonological awareness deficits can be identified as early as kindergarten, and that all at-risk children should be screened for developmental and learning disabilities. If speech-language pathologists notice signs of dyslexia, they should report them to the child's family and educators (Hogan, 2018). The longer one waits to intervene with children with various learning disabilities, the harder it will be to remediate them (Johnson, 2017). Scientific-based reading intervention can largely eliminate reading difficulties (McMaster, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2005), so intervening as early as possible will help facilitate lifelong success and higher self esteem for students diagnosed with LBLD (Hogan, 2018).

Speech-language pathology services should continue for students with LBLD through all levels of schooling, as language-based deficits affect children throughout education and beyond (Simon, 2000). Collins and Wolter (2018) discuss the difficulties of the elementary to high school transition for children with LBLD. The high school curriculum entails more language-demanding tasks in every subject. As a solution, they propose that SLP services for students with LBLD should include teaching self-determination strategies such as self-awareness, self-advocacy, goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and self-regulation. Through these strategies, students are informed about their diagnosis and the strengths and weaknesses they possess, taught to advocate for the support they need in school, set realistic goals for themselves, and lastly, understand when and how to problem-solve.

Students should know the details of their LBLD diagnosis and helpful accommodations (Collins & Wolter, 2018). Citing Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005), Collins and Wolter (2018) report that students with learning disabilities who take an active role in their learning are more likely to have successful post-school outcomes.

Proposed Study

Scientific Background

The hypothesis driving this paper has been that children with LBLD will struggle learning Hebrew as a second language, which will in turn negatively impact their Jewish identity because of the important role Hebrew plays in Jewish life and religious practice. While there are many possible intervention methods for students with LBLD, none yet focus on promoting a child's feelings of belonging to the Jewish community at large. Goldberg (2004) suggests the need for such intervention methods if students with LBLD are to develop strong Jewish identities (Avni 2012) and love for being Jewish (Ross 2004).

According to Goldberg's study, the fifth grade male students that had lower reading scores in both English and Hebrew demonstrated higher levels of behavioral problems. As the author had hypothesized, negative behavior was seen more prominently in students who experienced social exclusion as a result of Hebrew reading difficulties (Goldberg, 2004). Based on his findings, Goldberg (2004) closes his discussion by promoting early intervention assessment tools be utilized in modern Orthodox Jewish day schools to potentially stave off the issues caused by reading difficulties. Since early intervention places a child on the path to

success, Johnson (2017) suggests that all children at-risk for reading difficulties should be screened for developmental and learning disabilities as early as possible. To shed greater light on these findings, it is proposed that a study be done in which early assessment and intervention tools for LBLD are utilized to detect and treat literacy difficulties for young students. It is proposed that with early diagnosis and intervention for reading difficulties in Jewish day schools, students will not feel socially excluded and, therefore, have stronger Jewish identities (Avni 2012; Goldberg 2004, 2005).

Assessment and Intervention Proposal

The proposed study should be cross-sectional and longitudinal and involve two subject groups consisting of students from one selected modern Orthodox Jewish day school. The school should be a co-educational environment (expanding on Goldberg's studies of only male students) and include some 500 enrolled students, in kindergarten to eighth grade (expanding on Goldberg's fifth graders). Since phonological awareness deficits can be identified in kindergarten-age children (Johnson, 2017), it is proposed that students of all of these ages be assessed for LBLD and dyslexia. Once the diagnoses are made, intensive word-reading instruction would commence (Hogan, 2018) in English, the students' native language, based on findings from the LCDH (Sparks et al 1989; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991) and the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979) that suggest one's excellence in first language learning will yield greater abilities for acquisition of a second language. Counseling will be provided to the subjects to promote communal inclusion and personal Jewish identity (Ross, 2004) as well as support for the subjects to take an active role in their Jewish education, as students who do so are more likely to succeed than their passive peers (Collins & Wolter, 2018).

The proposed guidelines for the control group will consist of a matching number of students in each grade who were not diagnosed with LBLD and received the same rigorous education in English and Hebrew studies as the students in the first group. Throughout their enrollment in the school, the students from both groups will receive continual assessments for their English and Hebrew reading, decoding, and comprehension (Goldberg, 2004), psychological and behavior assessments, and consistent assessment of their Jewish identity by interview (Ross, 2004) to track their English and Hebrew language progress and Jewish identity development. Additionally, the students' Judaic and secular studies teachers will receive questionnaires regarding the subjects' behaviors (Goldberg, 2004). The assessments, interviews, and questionnaires will aid clinicians and educators in determining the effectiveness the reading intervention has against social exclusion, as negative behavior is seen as a result of communal marginalization (Goldberg, 2004). The results of the two groups should be compared in order to shed light on the effectiveness intervention for LBLD and dyslexia has on the development of one's Jewish identity. Since children with academic struggles will feel less of a connection to their faith (Goldberg, 2004, 2005; Ross, 2004), this study hypothesizes that, due to the introduction of early intervention, the Jewish identities of the students with LBLD that receive services will be similar to those of their typically developing contemporaries. Since other factors will not be accounted for, it cannot be inferred that they will be exactly the same.

By treating reading difficulties early, which yields greater remediation outcomes than later intervention (Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Schatschneider, & Underwood, 2007), and consequently promoting feelings of communal inclusivity, it is hypothesized that the children from the younger experimental groups will have stronger individual Jewish identities and connections to the Jewish community than those in the older experimental groups, but that

overall, reading intervention, first in English and then in Hebrew, will stem the trend for students with LBLD to be marginalized and experience social exclusion, leading to dissociation from their faith community. The ultimate goal is for students to *love* Judaism as opposed to those of Ross's (2004) study who just *knew* about it. If this hypothesis is proven, it can be suggested that the implementation of early reading assessment and intervention will change the future of the Jewish community.

Discussion

The hypothesis driving this paper has been that a child with LBLD who struggles with learning in their first language will have trouble learning Hebrew, a crucial part of Jewish practice, which will in turn lead to a lacking Jewish identity. If someone does not feel a strong connection to Judaism, they will likely attribute less importance to Jewish practice and the community at large will be less observant. To combat this unfortunate downward trend, a study involving early assessment and intervention is proposed.

Hebrew is an integral aspect of Jewish tradition and practice. The ability to read Hebrew is pivotal in one's Jewish identity formation on an individual and communal level (Goldberg 2004). From a young age, students in Jewish day schools are taught Hebrew in order to instill in them a connection to Jewish culture and religion (Avni, 2012), which places them on a path to utilize these learned skills for the rest of their lives. The Jewish identity of students who struggle with Hebrew literacy in schools will be weaker than those who do not experience the same difficulties (Goldberg, 2005).

As Goldberg (2004) alluded to, there is a correlation between academic achievement and religious connection. Horwitz (2022) explored this phenomenon further and found that adolescents with strong religious identities had positive academic outcomes. These students, who had God-centered self concepts, attributed their academic success and decisions to their deep connection to God and religion. Horwitz's findings demonstrated that when students succeed in a religious institution, they will thrive in an educational one. This study did not include students that struggle in school, like those with LBLD or other learning difficulties, and one is left to wonder if Horwitz's findings would apply to them as well.

Students diagnosed with LBLD will struggle with literacy tasks in their native language (ASHA website, *no date*). Since one's language skills in their first language serve as the foundation for second language acquisition (Sparks et al, 1989; Sparks and Ganschow, 1991; Cummins, 1979), children with LBLD, who experience academic challenges, are more likely to struggle learning a second language than their typically developing peers. It can be inferred then that Jewish students with LBLD and those who struggle learning in English, their first language, will have trouble acquiring Hebrew as a second language.

To explore the phenomenon of Hebrew instruction and Jewish students with language difficulties and gain clarity on the missing population of the Horwitz (2022) study, Ross (2004) and Goldberg (2004) have examined the experiences of these students in Jewish day schools. The challenging bilingual curriculum of Jewish day schools causes students to feel isolated and negative about themselves due to their inability to read and understand Hebrew (Ross, 2004). Goldberg (2004) further notes that reading disabilities can lead to poor academic achievement, lowered self-esteem, and exclusion from community, which in turn lead to behavioral problems. It was found that children with Hebrew reading difficulties, both inside and outside the

classroom, presented negative behavior due to their feelings of marginalization from the school and community at large (Goldberg, 2004).

Because this is a pressing topic for the future of the Jewish people, a cross-sectional and longitudinal study is proposed. To promote the most successful outcomes for children with LBLD, early diagnostic and intervention tools are to be utilized (Johnson, 2017). With the proposal of this study, the correlation between religious identity and academic success may be understood, which can in turn lead to the creation of early language learning intervention techniques to promote inclusivity in the Jewish community. It is the goal that with more services of this kind, adolescents with Hebrew reading difficulties that are at risk for weak Jewish identities will turn the trend around and cultivate meaningful connections to Judaism on an individual and communal level. By working from a young age to instill a strong sense of Jewish identity in adolescents, educators and clinicians have the power to catch Jewish students before they fall and, in turn, enhance the future of the Jewish community.

References

1. Adams Sanabria, A., Adelaida Restrepo, M., Walker, E., & Glenberg, A. (2022). A Reading Comprehension Intervention for Dual Language Learners With Weak Language and Reading Skills. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*. 1–22.
2. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). Learning disabilities. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/learning-disabilities/>
3. Avni, S. (2012). Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity. *Linguistics and Education*, 23(3), 323–333.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2012.06.004>
4. Bishop, D. V. M., Nation, K., & Patterson, K. (2014). When words fail us: insights into language processing from developmental and acquired disorders. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 369(1634), 1–11.
5. Collins, G., & Wolter, J. A. (2018). Facilitating Postsecondary Transition and Promoting Academic Success Through Language/Literacy-Based Self-Determination Strategies. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 49 (2), 176–188.
https://doi.org/10.1044/2017_lshss-17-0061
6. Connor, C. M., Morrison, F. J., Fishman, B. J., Schatschneider, C. & Underwood, P. (2007). The early years: Algorithm-guided individualized reading instruction. *Science*, 315(5811), 464–465.
7. Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2), 222–251.

8. Goldberg, S. J. (2004). The Relationship Between English (L1) and Hebrew (L2) Reading and Externalizing Behavior Amongst Orthodox Jewish Boys. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). New York University, NY.
9. Goldberg, S. J. (2005). Hebrew Reading Difficulties and Behavior Problems: Is There a Link? *Jewish Educational Leadership*, 4, 1.
10. Hogan, T. P. (2018). Five Ways Speech-Language Pathologists Can Positively Impact Children With Dyslexia. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 49(4), 902–905. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_lshss-dyslc-18-0102
11. Horwitz, I. M. (2022). *God, Grades & Graduation: Religion's Surprising Impact on Academic Success*. Oxford University Press.
12. Hutchins, M., & Engels, A. (2005). Foreign Language Instruction for Students with Learning Difficulties: Rethinking the Setting and Structure of Classes Using the Natural Approach. *Modern Language Studies*, 35(2), 71-81.
13. Johnson, B. (2017). Learning Disabilities in Children: Epidemiology, Risk Factors and Importance of Early Intervention. *BMH Medical Journal*, 4(1), 31–37.
14. McMaster, K. N., Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L. S., & Compton, D. L. (2005). Responding to nonresponders: An experimental field trial of identification and intervention methods. *Exceptional Children*, 71, 445–463.
15. Simon, C. S. (2000). Dyslexia and Learning a Foreign Language: A Personal Experience. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 50, 155-187.
16. Sparks, R. L., Ganschow, L., & Pohlman J. (1989). Linguistic Coding Deficits in Foreign Language Learners. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 39, 179–195.

17. Sparks, R. L., & Ganschow, L. (1993). The impact of native language learning problems on Foreign Language Learning: Case study illustrations of the linguistic coding deficit hypothesis. *The Modern Language Journal*, 77(1), 58–74.
18. Ross, D. (2004). Engaging Students' Voices in the Jewish Day School: Perspectives of Learning Disabled Students. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 70(1), 51–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00216240491020298>
19. Weissman, D. (2021). *Sarah Schenirer*. Jewish Women's Archive. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/schenirer-sarah>