

# Explaining Jewish Student Failure<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper will first present a description of the community of one particular Jewish school. It will then review some of the more widely debated theories of student failure and suggest an alternative explanation as the cause of failure for these Jewish students, i.e. the lack of a compelling reward as the end product of schooling. STUDENT FAILURE, BLACK STUDENTS, JEWISH EDUCATION, MINORITY EDUCATION, ANTHROPOLOGY OF EDUCATION.*

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I have never worked with a more difficult group of kids in any setting. They are just a very wild, very rowdy, very hyperactive bunch of kids.

What I teach is the values that these kids lack and what normal human beings have.

Comments of two teachers<sup>2</sup>

It was not long ago, in the context of writings by Kohl (1967), Kozol (1966), Rist (1973), Rosenfeld (1971), and others, that one might have assumed that the above comments were made in reference to black students in an inner-city school. Through the personal recountings of authors and the sensational reporting in the media, one was led to conjure up images of students throwing paper, talking back to teachers, and other examples of chaos, noise, and generally uncontrollable disruptions in the ghetto schools. Various theories were brought forth to account for these students' problems, including intelligence and heredity, cultural deprivation, and institutional deficiency. This article, however, and the opening quotes stand in marked contrast to those preconceived images as they refer not to poor black students in the ghetto but to the failure of middle-class Jewish students in a suburban Jewish afternoon school.

This paper will first present a description of the students, the classroom, the home, and the community of one particular Jewish school. It will then review some of the more widely debated theories of student failure as they might apply to this group. Finally, it will suggest an alternative explanation as the cause of failure for these Jewish students: the lack of a compelling reward as the end product of schooling.

## Site Selection and Research Methodology

This paper draws much of its data from an ethnographic study of a Jewish afternoon school (Schoem 1979b). Conceived within the framework of the "ethnic schools," the afternoon school represents an alternative developed

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by cultural pluralists to counter the use of public schools as instruments of cultural assimilation (Kopan 1974) and to go beyond the inherent limitations of special "multicultural and bilingual" programs within public schools (Epps 1974). Berkson (1920) explained the function of the afternoon school, saying, "Each system of schools would insure the integrity of the community which supports it; the public schools would further the society of the state; the religious and ethnic schools, the society of minority communities."

The particular school chosen for study was an elementary school operated under the auspices of a conservative Jewish synagogue.<sup>3</sup> This type of Jewish school was desired because it is statistically typical of a large percentage of Jewish schools in America (Lang 1968). As was the case with this school, the largest percentage of students attending Jewish schools nationally (44.4 percent) were enrolled in 2 to 5 day a week afternoon schools (Rockowitz and Lang 1976). Also, the largest number of Jewish schools appear to fall within the range of 100 to 299 students, as did this school with its approximately 250 students (Rockowitz and Lang 1976). Finally, the greatest number of conservative congregations who had such schools had a membership size of 100 to 249 families (Friedman 1979), as was the case in this study in which the congregation had approximately 200 families registered as members. The school met two afternoons (1½ hours each) and one Sunday morning (2½ hours) each week, although one of the afternoon sessions was optional. The curriculum in general conformed with the standard curriculum of the afternoon school.

For a period of 10 months, one full school year, the researcher was present at all school sessions as well as at other school and community-related events. The researcher gathered data on the staff, students, and parents both within and outside the school walls so as to afford a more complete picture of the culture of the school. Using the role model of participant as observer (Gold 1958), the researcher focused his observations on students in grades 4 through 7 because of their better developed verbal abilities and greater awareness of the world about them.

In-depth interviews were conducted with students, school staff, school board members, and parents. These 80 interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours. Theoretical sampling was used to determine who would be interviewed, employing the techniques of quota sampling, snowball sampling, and deviant sampling. Informal interviewing was also used frequently as a part of the researcher's role as participant observer. In addition, the researcher collected various school and synagogue documents that were made available to him, such as curricular materials, budget reports, and memos. Finally, for the purpose of comparison, observations for approximately 1 week were made at two reform and one orthodox afternoon schools, and at one Japanese and one Native-American afternoon school.

### **School Environs and Social Standing**

The Jewish school under study was located in a suburb of 50,000 people outside a large metropolitan area with a population numbering over 3 million. This larger metropolitan area was counted among the top 20 population centers for Jews in North America. Families who were associated with the

school lived in a number of surrounding suburban cities within a range of approximately 10 miles. Typical of these suburban cities were new, wide streets with large homes and spacious grounds. There was little industry in the area and most of the professional community commuted to work. None of the parents whom the researcher interviewed lived in apartments. These families lived in areas popularly recognized as middle-class neighborhoods in which the average home value ranged (as reported in May 1978) from \$69,000 to \$120,000. The homes of these families were always fashionably decorated, frequently with large and elaborately furnished kitchens, dining rooms, and living rooms. Some of the homes had swimming pools, many had front and back yards, and almost all had garages, many for two cars.

The fathers in the community were almost exclusively white-collar and professional workers. There were many doctors, lawyers, and business people. Many of the women in the community described themselves as housewives, but several also worked outside the home, although almost always in lower-status positions than their spouses in occupations such as teacher or nurse. The day-to-day routine of parents was dominated by work considerations but allowed for some family time and recreational activities such as television, movies, dinner out, and athletics. The women who were housewives took responsibility for shopping and other household responsibilities as well as for chauffeuring children to various school and after-school activities. The children were often involved daily in these organized activities, which included sports, dance, music, social events, and Jewish school.

### **Identity and Community**

The people in this Jewish community had accepted without question upper middle-class “Americana,” and where conflicts existed with traditional Jewish values or practices, the suburban American ethic almost always prevailed. For the great majority of these Jews, their Jewishness was a facet of life that was increasingly minimalized and less time consuming. Jewish behavior represented a kind of “stepping out” of one’s daily routine of life to provide some small link with one’s heritage. Even those few who bemoaned the fact that they were not as behaviorally Jewish as they would have liked recognized their submission to what they perceived to be overwhelming pressures not to behave Jewishly. One such woman said:

The subtle pressures of Americana are too strong—but there are no laws to stop you—you can do whatever you want. . . . Not doing these things means I’m giving up my Judaism. . . . But now, every time I give in a little, everyone applauds me, “Oh good! Now you’re becoming Americanized!” But I don’t know if that’s good—I don’t like it.

The Jewish people in the community felt proud of their identification as Jews, particularly out of deep concern for Jewish survival and a great hatred for antisemites. However, Kelman (1977) has characterized this type of identification without substance in a category he labels “compliance,” which may lead to “a nominal acceptance of group identity, devoid of substantive content, and subject to mobilization only in response to threats of group survival.” In

fact, what stood out as the most important attitudinal factor in the Jewish identity of these people was the fact that they were not non-Jews. Almost as a process of elimination, many understood their Jewish identity as meaning only that they belonged to a different religion than others. One parent stated this position as follows:

Being Jewish is what you're not. It's what you don't believe in. You're not Christian, not Hindu, not Buddhist. You're not a gentile so you're Jewish. But being Jewish doesn't entail believing in anything in particular.

The suburban community of this school represented something much different than that with which the adults or their parents had grown up. The physical structure of suburbia necessitated that people live a greater distance from one another and from the synagogue and Hebrew school. The secular schools that other children attended were comprised largely of non-Jews. However, even though families were desirous of being within driving distance of a synagogue and of having schools with a greater percentage of Jewish children, their choice of neighborhood was dependent upon a higher priority, which was where they could find the largest house in the wealthiest locale that they could afford, regardless of the religion or ethnicity of the community.

In the business community, either as students, consumers, or professionals, Jews studied, shopped, and worked with few other Jews about them and cited considerable concern about antisemitic attitudes. On a personal level, members of the Jewish community felt detached and conflicted. Teachers and parents were angry with one another, the Conservative Jews disliked and ridiculed Reform, Orthodox, and non-Jews, and, internally, organizational arguments were common.

Still, the Jews were ready to come together when the question of survival was at stake. Yet, in the interim, their days were consumed by the non-Jewish people, events, businesses, and neighborhoods in which they lived. They may have belonged to Jewish organizations, but they expected the organizations to do work, not themselves. They supported Israel, but preferred not to have anything to do with Israelis. They had Jewish friends, but they didn't do anything Jewish with them. They could recall with good memories that things were different when they were young, but they were unwilling to let those memories be anything but in the past.

### **Association with the School**

In explaining their reason for sending their children to the Jewish school, parents recurrently alluded to their decision in terms of ritual. One parent active in the school told the researcher that she sent her children because "everybody else did it—I'll do it, too. The grandparents expect you to do it and the parents expect you to do it." Parents believed that the realization of one's identification with the Jewish people came through the ritual ceremony of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.<sup>4</sup> It was the performance of the ritual, much more than any evaluation of its content, that was of importance to the majority of parents. Indeed most parents didn't even want to face questions about the quality of the school. Although they realized that their children were unhappy there,

their overriding concern was simply to be sure that their children were in attendance and that the school was operated on schedule and in an orderly fashion. One parent expressed this attitude, saying:

The kids really don't like Hebrew school, but that may even be traditional. You know, on occasion, Eddie has told me he hates Hebrew school, and I say, "Edward, that's wonderful. You're carrying on a Jewish tradition. Because when I went to Hebrew school I hated it, too."

The students did not have a choice in their attendance at the Jewish school. However, because the decision for them to attend came directly from their parents rather than from any governmental authority or statute, the issue was presumed to at least be open to debate and most students did have opinions about their attendance. What some students liked about attending the school was that in doing so they were pleasing their parents and grandparents. They also looked forward to enjoying the friendships they had developed at the school. Most students, however, even those who found things they liked about the school, told the researcher that, given the choice, they would choose not to attend. As one of the seemingly happier students at the school emphatically told the researcher, "If I had a choice, I would say no! Absolutely not!"

### **School Goals and Student Failure**

The goals of the school's educators were to teach students Jewish values, to interest them in pursuing Jewish studies beyond the elementary school level, to provide them with knowledge about the Jewish people, Jewish history, and Jewish religion, and to give them the necessary skills and desire to live actively Jewish lives. Built into the curriculum of the school were study of the Old Testament (the Torah),<sup>5</sup> Jewish history, Jewish holidays, Israel, prayer, the Holocaust, American Jewry, European Jewry, and the Hebrew Language.

The school was said to be among the best if not the very best Jewish school in the metropolitan area. The principal said of the curriculum:

The curriculum is solid. I am extraordinarily proud of it. . . . We teach the sources. I refuse to go along with all the modish courses that come along every year. I'm not sure we're reaching as many kids as we might, but we're giving them the best quality. We are teaching values. The whole curriculum is value oriented.

Still, both the principal and rabbi realized, at times, that what they wrote into the curriculum did not necessarily make its way into the students' hearts and minds. Indeed, despite their enthusiasm with what they had developed, they sometimes spoke of the difficulty in achieving all their goals. The rabbi stated:

I think the afternoon religious school is a failure; the distractions of the environment are so great . . . and children resent coming, parents driving kids and not sure they want to send kids. The message they get from parents, peers, even teachers, sometimes, about the school is not a positive one.

The ethnographic study of this school concluded that startlingly little cognitive material was being learned. This confirmed an earlier report by

Ackerman (1969) of a much broader sampling of schools. Although no standardized tests (none were used at the school) or independently written achievement tests were used, it was difficult not to recognize the immensity of the problem. Students in the sixth grade did not know Hebrew words being taught in the second grade, and the most basic terms for holidays, historical events, and religious observances were forgotten year after year and from week to week. Teachers were constantly dumbfounded in class by student ignorance of a core of the most elementary cultural information, and students neither studied nor did homework. Finally, teachers and students alike recognized and admitted that students were not learning the cognitive material to any acceptable degree or standard.

Students expressed disappointment, anger, and rebelliousness at not learning; the teachers spoke out of a deep sense of frustration, hopelessness, and despair. One bright, rebellious student revealed her unhappiness with the school, stating:

We don't learn to read [Hebrew], We haven't learned since third grade. We don't know what anything means . . . I think Hebrew school is dumb. I mean, we don't learn anything. Like right now, me and my friends are sitting back there writing notes to one another and talking, and the teacher is just having a conversation with herself.

Some of the students tried hard to get something more out of their experience, but as the following student indicated, they were not satisfied.

I don't really learn anything. Sometimes we look up answers but we don't remember anything. I told the teacher we shouldn't do it that way. I like discussions, though, but we don't have too many of those.

One teacher, who blamed the curriculum for the lack of learning, continued to be surprised that her students could not meet even her most minimal expectations. She said:

By four grades you expect them to know something, but really, they don't know anything! I don't mean anything, but very little. You expect children to read [Hebrew] in fourth grade. But they don't know!

Perhaps most indicative of the curricular failure was the emotional comment of one devoted teacher. Exasperated, she claimed, "Everyday I came back from the school I had a heart attack because I hadn't accomplished anything."

In the affective domain, too, the goals of the curriculum were not achieved. In class, teachers attempted to present to their students an image that indicated a normative standard to things Jewish within Conservative Judaism. The teachers also implied to their students that as individuals each teacher lived according to those normative standards. However, the teaching staff in practice was as a whole a diverse group within Jewish terms. It included some who were not religious, some who were antireligious, some who were quite confused about their Jewishness, and some who were observant in a traditional and religious manner.

It was difficult for students not to notice the teacher's aide with the transistor radio at his ear who periodically walked out of class on Sunday

mornings to listen to the latest football information. In one case, a senior teacher even left school early on certain Sundays in order to arrive at football games before kickoff time. In addition, students were never far enough away during recess not to overhear teachers excitedly describe the concert or movie they had been to on Friday evening, the Jewish Sabbath.

Students were also intensely aware of the types of relationships that they found they were able to develop with their teachers. Even as some teachers would attempt to teach the Biblical lesson of the importance and value of relationships between people, they would in the same moment often shout angrily at their students in the following way: "If you can't keep quiet and behave like human beings, you are going to have to pay the price."

Despite the hopes of the school staff to convey a certain image and feeling about being Jewish through the affective curriculum, what the students experienced in class was most often different from what was intended. What students did learn about being Jewish was vague and ambiguous, and the feelings they developed were marked by ambivalence.

### **School Behavior**

One of the most commonly expressed emotions used to describe the students' experience was boredom. Although it was primarily students who talked about being bored, a few teachers and parents accepted their talk as accurately depicting their feelings. As one parent said, "I think the school is just plain boring for the kids." The students themselves were very certain that they were feeling bored at the school. Typical of the student attitude was the comment that "people don't usually listen because it's boring." One student explained as follows just how he and his friends experienced the Jewish school:

Pre-K is the only important class. After that they just teach you over again and over again. That's why everyone is bored. Like today, nobody answered the question because we all knew it and it's the same thing. We're just bored of it.

Boredom often led to activities such as doodling, making airplanes, playing with a wristwatch, passing notes, whispering, sniffing, talking, making weird noises, moving chairs, rocking on chairs, hitting, kicking, and the like. These types of behavior, added to an epidemic of late starting times and a plethora of daily classroom interruptions for messages, observations, deliveries, and so on, helped to create a less than conducive learning environment. But beyond this routine of class disruptions, there were not infrequent cases of students openly mocking teacher's comments, interrupting discussions with what were intended as rude remarks, hiding in closets, walking on tables, throwing paper airplanes across the classroom, and intimidating and scapegoating certain individuals until they would cry. One parent remarked that "what the kids have learned is that when you come to Hebrew school, you can misbehave." Another parent labeled his child's class "a jungle." The school board chairperson commented:

I think it is disturbing that a Hebrew school has discipline problems. It makes me sad. You would hope that we would be a different caliber of people.

At a staff orientation meeting prior to the start of the school year, there was an attempt to approach the issue of disciplining students in humanistic terms. The rabbi openly acknowledged at that session that “discipline was the big issue last year.” Yet a few weeks into the year a replacement teacher was selected on the basis of his having recently served in a well-known crack Israeli army unit. Although he was inexperienced as a teacher, at the next school board meeting the principal showered praise on his quality as a teacher strictly for his ability to discipline: “He had the class under control. He talked continuously and the kids didn’t know what hit them.”

Another teacher, however, who was less inclined toward her role as disciplinarian, eventually left her teaching position because of the ugly interaction with her students. She described how her relationship with them had deteriorated:

I began to hate my students. They were cruel and hostile, snobbish, materialistic, and a very nasty bunch. I finally felt no sympathy for them and I couldn’t reach beyond that. I could have handled them, but I didn’t like them.

On the student’s side, a self-proclaimed disruptive student analyzed the student-teacher relationship in the following manner:

And the teachers—yeah. They are terrible. To me it seems the only reason they’re here is for the money. But even from the good teachers you can’t learn anything because we’re so used to goofing off and doing what we want that we tell the teacher what to do.

## **Traditional Explanations of Student Failure**

### *Intelligence and Heredity*

Jensen’s (1969) and Herrnstein’s (1971) assertions that certain racial and ethnic groups may genetically inherit inferior intelligence have often been used to explain student failure in school. These assertions, however, have been rigorously and convincingly rebutted by a wide range of scholars (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Ogbu 1978).

While the current argument on intelligence and heredity has focused primarily on black Americans, at the turn of the century IQ testers targeted Jewish-Americans, declaring that 83 percent of all immigrant Jews were innately feeble-minded (see deLone 1979). Today, in contrast, 86 percent of Jewish students in the United States make plans to attend college (Goldstein 1974), and it is estimated that by 1985 half of all Jews under age 65 will be college graduates (Maslow 1974). Furthermore, today such “feeble-minded” Jews hold 9 percent of professional positions at colleges and universities in the United States and 32 percent of those same positions at the most prestigious institutions (Lipset and Ladd 1974).

The same Jewish students whose disruptive behavior and unsatisfactory achievement levels have been described here were, in contrast to Jensen’s theory of eugenics, not untypical of these statistics of the wider Jewish population. Those same students who in the Jewish school did not do their schoolwork, talked back to teachers, threw airplanes in class, and were, in



general, failures, were reported to be conscientious, polite, well-behaved, and doing extremely well in their public and private secular day schools. In this case, theories of inferior group intelligence that might be suggested to explain student failure in the Jewish school could be immediately refuted by those same students' accomplishments in their all-day schools.

### *Cultural Deprivation*

Cultural deprivation theorists have pointed to the home and the community for not providing children with the experiences or cultural patterns necessary to be successful in school (Bloom, Davis, and Hess 1965). This theory, which has been used primarily to focus on American blacks and whites, has been criticized for a number of reasons that have led scholars such as Ogbu (1978) to conclude that it "does not satisfactorily explain why black children do poorly in school."

Himmelfarb (1975), however, has suggested that the failure of the Jewish school results from the cultural deprivation of Jewish children. He writes that "the term 'culturally deprived' can be more properly applied to Jewish children with regard to Jewish culture than to lower class blacks or other Americans with regard to American culture." Himmelfarb states that Jewish children enter the Jewish school with linguistic deficiencies and with a lack of encouragement and reinforcement from their homes and community.

Many of the teachers at the school under study concurred with Himmelfarb's reasoning. Soon after the start of the school year, they began to realize that initial minimal expectations for student learning would not be met. By mid-year, as there developed an acknowledgment of the failure of their instruction, they became defensive about their own capabilities and turned to blaming the home environment (Schoem 1979a). One angry teacher complained:

Why should the kids have to go to Hebrew school and then return home and find a Christmas tree in their home. It's hypocritical!

Another distraught teacher echoed similar sentiments, saying

If Judaism is positive at home and happens at home, school will have meaning. If a child learns esoterically about Havdalah at school but never experiences it—what does he need it for?

There are, however, difficulties with this theory even as it is applied to Jewish culture and the Jewish school. First, to note again, these same low-achieving Jewish children in the Jewish school were high achievers in their all-day secular schools. Some individuals, it is true, may not have known Hebrew upon entering the Jewish school, but, as a group, they did not have any linguistic difficulties. In fact, in their secular schools, some children were successfully learning foreign languages other than Hebrew, which were also not spoken in the home. Second, as a principle, the parents and community were neither incapable nor unwilling to show encouragement or offer reinforcement to their children. In fact, this they did very strongly in regard to secular school matters. Furthermore, there was no evidence available to show that children from homes in which there was a "model" display of encourage-

ment and reinforcement were any more successful than children from typical homes. Schulweis (1978) writes:

I doubt the cause is . . . parental ignorance, incompetence, or lack of desire. . . . We are not dealing with bad Jews. We are dealing with people who have an entirely different agenda of priorities and needs from the curricula and agenda we represent.

### *Institutional Deficiency*

Critics who argue that the schools themselves are to blame for student failure suggest that the public schools are institutionally organized to favor white middle-class and upper-class students and to promote failure among the poor and black (Rist 1973; Ogbu 1974). In the Jewish school, there existed critics who argued that while the school wasn't favoring any particular group of Jewish students, it was so structured that it was destined to produce widespread failure.

The school, it was argued by the educational staff, could never achieve its curricular goals in its limited meeting hours. They argued, too, that the congregation board financed the school only at a level of school maintenance rather than educational excellence. These folks, the critics complain, were content to go along with underemployed teachers, inadequate facilities, and limited numbers of employees until the very survival of the school came into question.

Parents, too, were not pleased at what they perceived as less than rigorous enforcement of rules and less than the highest academic standards being demanded. One parent said:

If the Hebrew school operated more like a public school, if there were more discipline or order, she [her daughter] would be learning here.

They noted with dismay the fact that the school did not have grades, give tests, or stress competition on a par with the public schools. Finally, parents placed blame on what they felt was the lack of training and poor quality of the teaching staff and the lacking organizational skills of the school principal. One parent also implied that there was not only a lack of dedication and commitment on the part of the school staff but incompetence as well, saying

Teachers in the public school district here want to teach here because the students are so bright; the pay here is one of the lowest in the state. So I feel if you have a born teacher, it won't matter how much we pay. And the same goes with an administrator.

Although many of these criticisms of the school held some truth, they nevertheless did not provide an adequate explanation for the failure of Jewish students at the school. As noted earlier, this Jewish school, which had so many problems, was recognized not as an inferior school but as one of the very best schools in the area. Second, the attempt to compare the Jewish school curriculum and environment with that of the public school based on identical criteria seems pedagogically and culturally unreasonable given that the two were intended to serve much different purposes. Third, studies have shown that Jewish schools enhanced with even greater financial support<sup>6</sup> and a closer

resemblance to the public schools (see Ackerman 1969; Bock 1976) have continued to fail for their students.

### **An Alternative Explanation of Student Failure**

Public school is important because that could do with getting a job or something. But with Hebrew school that's not gonna have anything to do with; well, if you learn—but what's it gonna have to do with when you get older. What do you care if Moses crossed the Sea or something? I don't care. (Comments of a 7th Grade Student)

The thesis of this paper is that the explanation for failure of students in the Jewish school lay in their parents' and their own perception that there was no compelling reward to be expected from their education. What the school held out as its ultimate reward was educated participation in the Jewish community according to an ethically and religiously based Jewish "way of life." That reward was expressed ambiguously and with ambivalence, understood with confusion and, ultimately, never accepted. In its place, the ritual of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah was seized upon as a tangible and immediate reward and was elevated to a point beyond its inherent value. The prize held out by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah may have helped in keeping students in school until age 13, but it did not possess the sustaining value necessary to ensure any degree of quality of participation and performance in the school.

Education is a value that has long been honored by the Jewish people and has been tied to status mobility (Ogbu 1982) among the Jewish people. Jewish scholarship and learning were a culturally approved method of achieving status and, as such, influenced the way in which parents reared and socialized their children, as well as influenced the image that children had for their own development to adulthood. But, in this community, the "People of the Book" had adapted the value and goals of education to coincide with that tradition of American capitalism that involved competing for material prosperity. Although education still retained its valued status, its value was now measured foremost in terms of its economic rewards, and the culturally approved instrument (Spindler 1974) for achieving this new status shifted from the Jewish afternoon school to the secular school system. As a result, the investment of effort and commitment from parents and students alike shifted, too, from the afternoon school to the secular school. The 12-year-olds who complained that "Hebrew school doesn't matter" were speaking truthfully about the attitudes and behaviors they saw valued at home and in the community and which they were learning to value themselves. For them, going to Harvard "counted"; studying a portion of the Torah did not (Schoem 1981). One parent seemed to be describing her own attitudes as she purported to explain her children's feelings:

When they go to public school they see it as necessary for college or professional or business fields. But I don't feel they see it as essential that you be equipped with a Jewish background when you go out into the world.

But it wasn't necessary for any parents to speak for their children. Another seventh grader commented, "Who cares if you get an 'F' in Hebrew school. It won't stop you from getting into college." A third student explained:

Public school is more important because you can go to college and stuff like that but this you don't have to know to live or anything. . . . But you have to know math. I don't feel like this is much of a school—it's kind of a stupid place.

For the Jews in this suburban community, education was not the only value or life-style they associated with being Jewish that had become secondary in importance to their "Americanized" lives. For instance, although they had some regrets about moving away from family for better paying jobs, their choice to move for money had been clear. Observance of the Jewish Sabbath, too, had fallen victim for most people because of their new hectic life-styles and changing priorities.

These changes, along with the problems of the school and education, were rooted in what is a deeper American problem for all its minorities,<sup>7</sup> that the condition of assimilation and subordination is more normative to minorities in American society than are the dreams and visions of cultural pluralists (Schermerhorn 1970; Newman 1973). While accepting so fully the many aspects of white upper-middle-class America, these Jews had fallen victim to a subtle but powerful assimilative process. As such, and however unaware, they found themselves unable to participate fully in both their own and the dominant culture. Rather, they found themselves caught between, on the one hand, their "pragmatic instrumental preference"—secular school and status mobility, and, on the other hand, their "romanticized instrumental preference"—Jewish school and Jewish learning, and their "idealized identity"—traditional Jewish religious attitudes and behavior (Spindler, 1976). The result, then, was that these Jewish students no longer valued or understood what had long been held as most important within their own heritage and which was what the Jewish school continued to offer as its reward but without the associated linkage to status mobility. In turn, the reward had little or no meaning, and the students' behavior and achievement levels showed miserable failure.

### **Summary**

It was demonstrated that the students at this Jewish school had failed by a wide margin to meet minimal school standards in cognitive and affective learning areas. Disrespectful and disruptive behavior, as observed by the researcher and reported by teachers, parents, and the offending students themselves, was normative in this setting and, according to these same informants, had reached epidemic proportions.

The theory of heredity and intelligence as an explanation of school failure could not explain Jewish student failure in this case because these same Jewish students were reported to be conscientious, polite, well-behaved, and high academic achievers in their secular all-day schools. The theory of cultural deprivation was shown to offer only an incomplete explanation of student failure, best understood in the context of societal pressures to pursue other-than-Jewish values and life-styles. Although institutional deficiencies did exist, it was shown that neither the motivation to change nor the occurrence of substantive qualitative change would have been possible by themselves to alter student failure.

It appears that Jewish students were not successful in this Jewish school

because they did not value or understand the rewards made available to them through the school and because their means of achieving status mobility had shifted away from the Jewish school. However, apparently because these same students did indeed value the rewards of the public school system and had access to them, and because this school system had become their instrument of status mobility, they were remarkably successful in those schools. Comparison with other groups of minority students, looking at their records of success or failure in different educational settings, while keeping in mind the question of their status mobility system and the criteria of valuing and accessibility of rewards, could provide new insights.

### Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the AERA annual meeting, New York, April 1982. I wish to thank John U. Ogbu for his helpful thoughts and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. Quotations without a text-listed reference are taken from Schoem (1979b).
3. Conservative refers to the religious posture of the synagogue. Most Jewish schools operate under the religious-congregational auspices of reform, conservative, or orthodox, listed here according to an increasing degree of traditional religious observance.
4. Ritual ceremony, held in a synagogue, in which a 13-year-old boy or girl reaches the status and assumes the duties of a "man" or "woman."
5. Torah refers to the first five books of the Old Testament.
6. It has been estimated that \$200 million was spent on Jewish education in the United States in 1976–1977 (Brody 1978).
7. The Jews in this study were defined as an ethnic minority. They were defined as an ethnic group because they are both a self-perceived group and perceived by others as a group, are transgenerational, and hold common historical roots, a common sense of historical continuity, and a common culture that includes common traditions. They have a religion, a language, and a geographical center. Inclusion in the Jewish group is usually by circumstance of birth, although conversion is possible. There are also certain genetic disorders that are generally limited to Jewish people. Finally, some Jews neither accept nor practice much of the preceding in their personal identities as Jews, but still remain Jews.

Within the context of American society, the Jews are considered a minority group because they are (1) culturally subordinate while not necessarily being socioeconomically subordinate and, less importantly, because they are (2) numerically subordinate. Given Ogbu's typology (1978), the Jews living in America today would be accurately defined as an autonomous minority group.

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