

Brandeis University

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Bringing Educational Technology into Supplementary Jewish Education:

Evaluation of ShalomLearning

Fern Chertok
Rachel Minkin
Annette Koren
Leonard Saxe



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Introduction

Complementary Jewish education, the learning venue for most Jewish children in the 21st century (Wertheimer, 2008), faces difficult challenges and limitations. Traditional curricula have been critiqued for their lack of focus on Jewish values, leaving students with little ability to see connections between what they are learning in supplementary school and their everyday lives. Additionally, they often lack curricular continuity between grades. Traditional forms of Jewish supplementary education have also been described as “out of step” with technological advances in secular education and unresponsive to the increasing socio-cultural trends of pluralism, independence, and choice (Woocher, 2012). Although large-scale efforts such as the Experiment in Congregational Education and The Re-Imagine Project attempted to systemically transform the field of supplementary education, the “grammar” or structure and assumptions of Jewish education have remained the same over the last half century: Students sit at desks, and teachers lead them from the front of the room (Aron, 2014).

ShalomLearning (SL) was designed to make supplementary Jewish education an attractive, relevant, engaging, and content-rich experience for Jewish students, their families, and teachers. SL combines a values-based, spiral curriculum for grades two through seven, with a “blended education” approach, harnessing technology to Jewish education. The curricular approach was designed to leverage and integrate classroom time with offsite online learning. The blended learning capacity of SL enables teachers to reach students through virtual classrooms and access to online resources and activities. Schools can utilize the SL curriculum exclusively in their classroom, exclusively

online, or in combination. SL was launched in 2011, and in the 2016-17 academic year, reached students at over 40 congregational schools in the United States and Canada. SL continues to grow and, in the 2017-18 school year, served students at 80 congregational schools.

Premised on the proposition that a topical, tech-savvy, values-based curriculum can offer content relevant to students and engage them at school and at home, SL believes that students who have trouble focusing in an after-school setting or have special learning needs, and students who find the traditional curricula of afterschool programs boring at best and irrelevant at worse, may be able to better engage with a multisensory and interactive curriculum. SL is also intended to help students develop a moral compass and see Jewish values as a “meaningful way to navigate the world.”

Congregational teachers are typically part-time employees, and the majority lack professional certification in secular or Jewish educational pedagogy (Jewish Education Service of North America, 2008). They have limited time to develop original lesson plans and few opportunities to learn from peers. SL was intended to support Jewish supplementary school teachers with access to a prepared curriculum that could be edited and customized for their classes. Through ongoing professional development opportunities, SL believes teachers can become more competent and confident professionals, especially regarding the integration of technology and online platforms into their pedagogy.

This report describes a two-year study of SL conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern

Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University. The goal of the research was to yield a rich body of systematic data that SL can use as a basis for decision making and strategizing for maximum program effectiveness. The research addressed a broad array of questions about the implementation, outcomes, and impacts of SL including the following areas of inquiry:

- What is the experience of students involved in SL?
- What new knowledge do students acquire especially related to Jewish values?
- How does SL enhance and shape students' thinking about Jewish values?
- How do students apply their new or expanded understanding of Jewish values both inside and outside of the classroom?
- What is the experience of educators implementing SL with their students?
- How does involvement with SL influence the perspectives and skills of teachers regarding the use of technology to support Jewish education in supplementary school settings?

We begin the report by describing the elements that comprise the SL approach and continue with an explanation of the study methodology. The discussion then explores how SL was used in synagogue schools across North America. The report also examines the reactions of students to the SL values curriculum and how it has affected their understanding and application of Jewish values. We also explore educators' perceptions of the curriculum and the use of technology in the classroom. The report closes with a discussion of program accomplishments and areas for further development.

The ShalomLearning approach

SL is a multi-faceted approach to Jewish supplementary education. It incorporates a values-based curriculum, a curriculum for teaching Hebrew, an online learning management system for use with virtual classes or asynchronous learning, parent activity materials, and teacher training on the use of these elements.

Jewish values curriculum: SL is a spiral curriculum with seven values repeated in each grade with a different focus. The seven units of the curriculum center on the Jewish values of *Teshuvah*, *B'Tzelem Elohim*, *Gevurah*, *Achrayut*, *HaKarat HaTov*, *Koach HaDibbur*, and *Shalom*. Each unit includes four ready-to-use sessions with lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations, and resources appropriate for virtual and brick-and-mortar classrooms. The units also incorporate lessons and activities related to holidays and prayers. The lesson plans and PowerPoint presentations may be edited, or sections added or deleted as teachers deem appropriate, and the materials can be reconfigured to best fit the schedules and the needs of the students. Teachers are also provided with sample emails to communicate curricular content to parents and links to additional resources for teaching or for the educators' own learning.

Hebrew curriculum: The SL Hebrew curriculum consists of lessons focused on decoding and *tefillot*. Each lesson includes a PowerPoint presentation and resources that can be used in virtual or brick-and-mortar classrooms. There are online, self-paced activities students can complete to supplement

classroom learning. At the time of this study, SL curated available content from Torah Aura and Online Jewish Learning.¹

Learning Management System (LMS): The LMS allows students and teachers to log onto the platform from anywhere they have Internet access. Students can talk or “chat” in conversation threads and also react and respond to each other’s posts. Teachers can track student progress and provide them with feedback using this platform. Teachers also have the opportunity through the LMS to communicate with peer educators.

Virtual classroom: Students use the LMS to access their virtual classrooms at appointed times to join their teacher and classmates. Students can communicate with each other and the teacher throughout the class by speaking or using the chat box. Educators also have the option of assigning and tracking homework tasks for completion between classes.

Family activities: SL provides materials for in-person parent *havurah* activities related to the target values. Parent education is also available through the LMS. These activities can be as diverse as scavenger hunts for children with their parents or parent-only study sessions.

Teacher training and technology support: SL provides several forms of professional development: self-paced learning through the LMS, one-on-one sessions with SL staff, a two-day in-person retreat over the summer, and SL webinars. These resources are designed to help teachers navigate the LMS, share resources and best practices, and understand how best to use the curriculum and ancillary materials.

¹ In the 2017-18 school year SL replaced Online Jewish Learning with JlearnHub.

Methodology

To better understand the use of SL in participating schools and its impact on students, the research team utilized qualitative and quantitative strategies. The research methods included surveys, focus groups, and interviews with teachers, Education Directors (EDs), and students during the 2016-17 school year.

Surveys

The research team conducted surveys with teachers and EDs utilizing SL at two points in time during the 2016-17 school year. Educators attending the Summer 2016 retreat were surveyed prior to the start of the school year (July-August), and all educators were surveyed in Spring 2017 (May-June) at the close of the school year. The Summer 2016 survey asked about attitudes toward technology in education, prior use of values-based curricula, and challenges faced in supplementary education. The response rate for this survey was 89%. The Spring 2017 survey asked about utilization of SL, reactions to program components, and perceptions of the impact of the program on teachers and their students. The response rate for the Spring 2017 survey was 62%.²

Focus groups

The research team conducted focus groups with 5th grade and older students at nine schools at two points in time: Fall 2016 and Spring 2017. Each of these schools was using the SL values curriculum for the first time during the 2016-17 school year. Fall focus groups concentrated on the students' experiences in Hebrew school in previous years and their introduction to SL. End-of-year focus groups asked students what they had learned about Jewish values and their impressions of their supplementary school experience during the 2016-17 school year.

Interviews

During the 2016-17 school year, the research team conducted interviews with nine EDs and teachers. These interviews focused on the schools' goals in using SL, the experience of implementing the curriculum, and the perceived impact on teachers, students, and their parents.

² Based on school lists provided by SL and the results of the 2017 educator survey, the researchers were able to verify that 40 congregational schools used the SL curriculum (values or Hebrew) in 2016-17. An additional four schools notified the research team that they had not used SL in the 2016-17 school year; and an additional six schools were unconfirmed for use of SL.

Findings

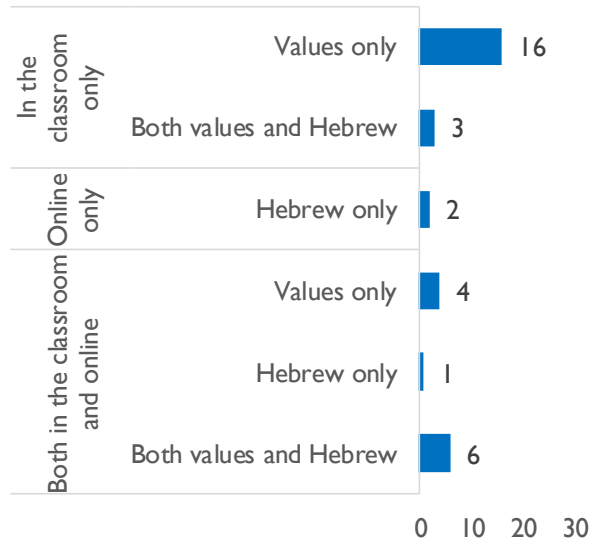
How SL is used in schools

In the 2016-17 academic year, a little over one-quarter (27%) of participating schools employed both the SL values and Hebrew curricula, and the majority (61%) of schools used only the SL values curriculum. Only three schools used the Hebrew curriculum without the values curriculum.

As shown in Figure 1, most schools used SL exclusively in in-person classroom settings. Two schools reported using SL exclusively online, and in both of these cases, the schools were implementing only the Hebrew curriculum. Eleven schools used SL as a blended curriculum, both in their buildings and in virtual classrooms.

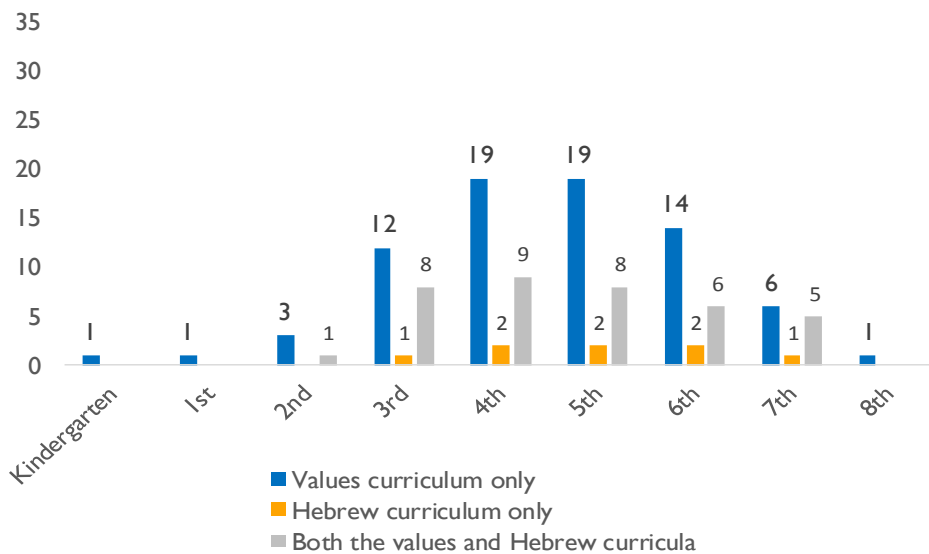
Among participating schools, SL values curriculum was most frequently included in 4th and 5th grade education programs (Figure 2). Slightly fewer schools employed SL values

Figure 1: Mode of implementation of SL



curriculum with their 3rd or 6th grade classes. The Hebrew curriculum was deployed across 3rd through 7th grade classes.

Figure 2: Use of SL values and Hebrew curricula by grade



n=36

Reactions to the SL virtual classroom

The Spring 2017 survey asked teachers who had used the SL virtual classroom to reflect on this pedagogical approach. As shown in Figure 3, two-thirds (67%) agreed that SL online technology provides an engaging way for students to learn, and 62% agreed that it is an effective way to increase exposure to Jewish learning. A similar portion agreed that the technology is easy for students to work with, and a little over half (55%) indicated that it was easy for students to connect to the online platform, or that it enables students to make up for missed classroom time (54%). Forty-seven percent of teachers agreed that it provides effective classroom management capabilities or generates enthusiasm among their students (46%).

The surveys asked teachers and EDs working with virtual classrooms about the impact of

this pedagogical approach on the development of connections among students. Almost half of teachers (48%) and two-thirds of EDs (67%) agreed at least “somewhat” that the virtual classroom made it difficult for their students to form friendships (Figure 4). In interviews, educators noted the importance of fostering direct human interaction among students whose only opportunity for developing friendships with other Jewish children may be in the religious school setting. Several teachers commented that once students knew each other in person, it was easy to continue that sense of community online. However, in those settings where students’ in-person experience involved groups of students different from those in their online class, teachers found it more difficult to weave the students into a cohesive group with a sense of connection and trust with each other.

Figure 3: Teacher impressions of SL classroom

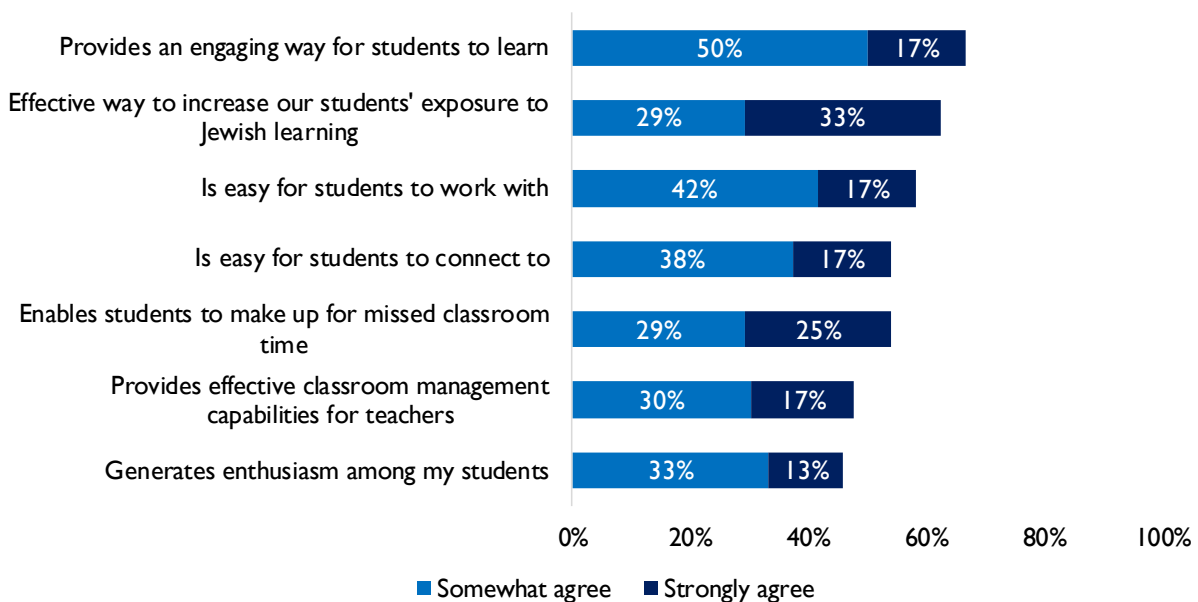
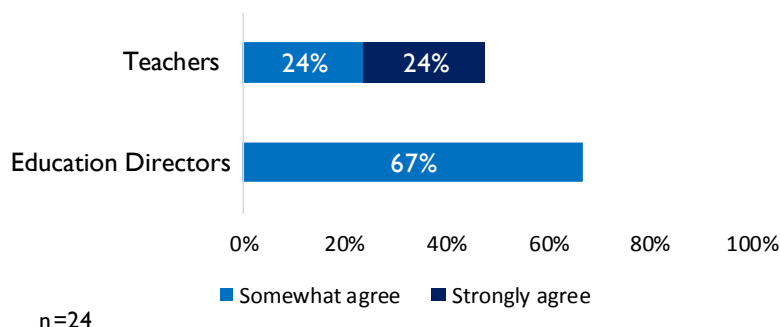


Figure 4: Teacher perceptions that virtual classrooms make it difficult for students to form friendships



Use of assignments outside class time and parent involvement

In interviews, we asked EDs if and how they utilized SL's online options through the LMS for homework or between-class preparatory work. When homework was assigned, it was almost exclusively in connection with the Hebrew curriculum. The decision not to use the LMS for independent work related to the values curriculum was framed as an acknowledgement that teachers were unlikely to be able to motivate students to engage in assignments outside of the classroom.

While there are at home activities..., we don't assign those because the kids would never do them. It's hard enough to get them to do their Hebrew homework... We're never going to assign homework for the values curriculum. (ED)

Members of my [educator] team wanted to use some of the videos as a flipped classroom model, that we would give [students] as homework. The kids would watch them at home and they would discuss them in class. So even though that was told to the teachers at our teacher orientation meeting, within several weeks they were all bringing their laptops in [to show the videos in class]. (ED)

In interviews, we also asked EDs about their use of SL parent education materials and

activities. Only a very small number of schools reported implementing SL family *havurah* sessions and sometimes in only a limited manner. For example, one ED reported offering one family education program per year per grade based on the SL curriculum. One of the two schools that used the *havurah* sessions for family activities on a monthly basis reported that these activities have brought a new group of parents into Jewish education and strengthened their connection to the synagogue.

Student reactions to SL values curriculum

During focus group discussions in Spring 2017, we asked students to reflect on how their Hebrew school experience had changed since the incorporation of the SL values curriculum. Students noticed changes in their class content, format (interactive versus frontal), use of technology, and the pace and focus of lessons.

It was very different. I have to say, we did a lot more actually learning stuff. [In] previous years we've done a lot of review and more Hebrew or learning words in Hebrew, which is interesting, and I like doing that. But this was more the values of Judaism, and that's interesting to learn about and fun to think about.

My first one [word to describe Hebrew school this year] would probably be educational, because I learned a lot. Second, enthralling, because we watched a lot of videos, and we listen[ed] to a bunch of stories that really changed my perspective on things.

Students appreciated the multimedia and hands-on aspects of the SL values curriculum. Students often found SL stories, videos, or exercises to be engaging, meaningful, and memorable. Although they mentioned that some of the videos did not seem relevant or age-appropriate to them, overall, students welcomed this pedagogic tool.

Students discussed how approaching Jewish values through stories, both text-based and contemporary, made it personally relevant for them. Students were particularly positive in their descriptions of interactive activities, such as skits and discussions, that connected the values to their lives. For example, if a video showed peers experiencing the consequences of their choices, students found it easy to relate the material to similar situations and social and ethical quandaries in their own lives.

I liked how we heard a story about it [Jewish value] and we talked [about] what you should do.

I think that my favorite thing was probably learning a bunch of stories and learning what they actually meant. Before I just knew there was a story...but now I know actually what the story is trying to teach you. Trying to get perspectives of other people, how they feel about it.

Some students appreciated that there was more class discussion with SL than they had previously experienced in supplementary school. They enjoyed the opportunity to share their thoughts on Jewish values and to hear those of their peers.

I think one of the things that [is different with SL] is that there's more discussion. We get to discuss things more. I think it's a good thing, because if you're

discussing it, you form your own opinion. It's nice if the teacher's talking to us but not controlling it.

I feel like this year we were really given more of an opportunity to share our opinions and to listen to other people's...opinions, and...it wasn't a matter of trying to persuade each other but just kind of take another perspective.

I think it's interactive learning with your peers. You share a lot of discussions, which is nice.

I like the way I'm learning by discussing a story and what relates to it.

Teachers noted, and we observed, that students were captivated by anything that involved alternative media, such as videos and music. We had the opportunity to observe students in an online class dancing to the same music in their respective bedrooms. We also saw a group of fourth grade boys enter the class singing a song they had previously seen on a SL video.

The SL values curriculum intentionally integrates PowerPoint presentations and hands-on activities. In some classrooms, however, the PowerPoint slides were shared but not accompanied by interactive activities. In these instances, students were less engaged and did not see SL as particularly innovative or exciting.

It's kind of boring just sitting there just looking at the PowerPoint while she's talking.

I feel like Shalom Learning was mostly just PowerPoint presentations. It was helping us learn the stuff, but I don't feel like it was fun doing it.

Teacher reactions to SL values curriculum

Teachers and EDs expressed their appreciation of the SL values curriculum. They were enthusiastic about the content and the multi-media materials. They found the SL focus on Jewish values and their real world applications to be very attractive and felt that the curriculum filled a gap in the resources available in supplementary education.

Educators noted that SL gave them the language and methods for translating Jewish text and practices into messages that have meaning and relevance for contemporary students. They also appreciated that the values curriculum was comprised of a cohesive and well-conceived set of lesson plans.

ShalomLearning lessons have had a very positive impact overall at our school.

I enjoyed the development of each lesson, and the accumulative knowledge of the whole program.

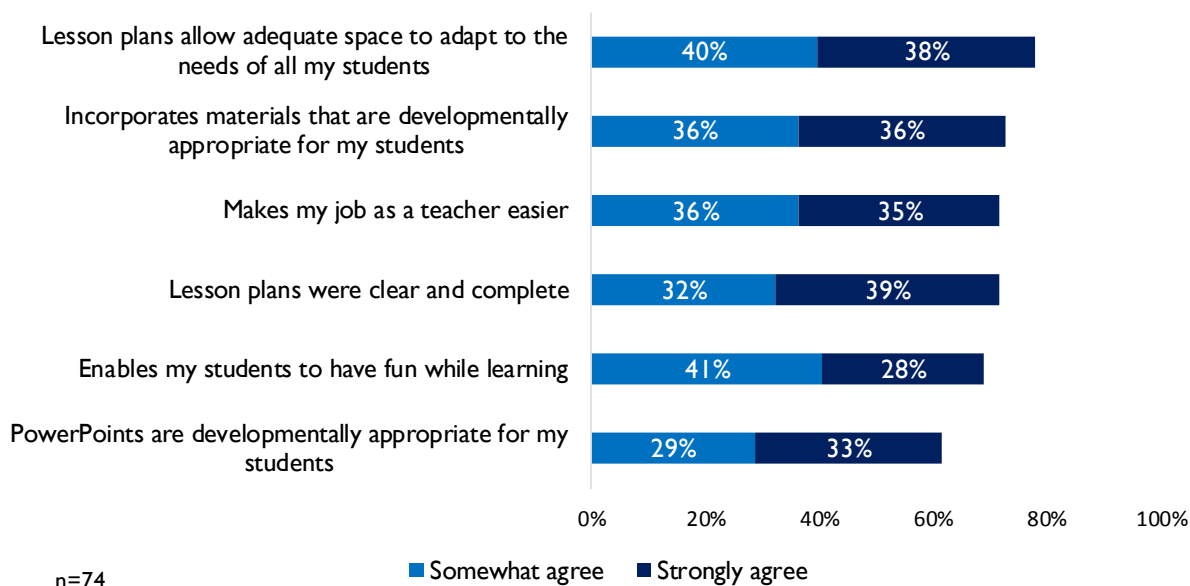
It is inspiring and stimulating, enriching, and exploring. Kol haKavod!

I liked incorporating ShalomLearning into the curriculum. It was detailed and helpful in planning the lesson and instruction.

The set up of the lessons is very helpful, as it builds off of previous lessons and encourages kids to remember previous weeks.

The Spring 2017 survey asked educators to reflect on their use of the SL values curriculum. The majority “somewhat” or “strongly agreed” that the curriculum made their jobs as teachers easier (71%), that lesson plans were clear and complete (71%), and allowed room for adaptation to the different learning needs of students (78%) (Figure 5). The majority (72%) also agreed that SL materials were developmentally appropriate for their students and allowed their students to have fun while learning Jewish content (69%).

Figure 5: Teacher impressions of SL values curriculum



Almost universally, teachers agreed at least “somewhat” that the SL curriculum focused on Jewish values relevant to their students (92%), engaged their students in conversation about Jewish values (89%), and enabled their students to develop an understanding of those values (86%) (Figure 6). The majority of teachers also agreed that the curriculum did a good job of integrating holidays (75%) and rituals into Jewish value units (71%), and of engaging students in discussion about the holidays (73%).

Comparing teachers’ responses to the Summer 2016 and Spring 2017 surveys indicates a statistically significant increase in their agreement that they are well prepared to educate students about Jewish values (Figure 7). Teachers showed more modest gains in their perceptions of their incorporation of Jewish values into lesson plans, the coherence of their school’s approach for teaching Jewish values, and linking values to the holidays. Overall, educators were very positive about the SL values curriculum. Some also pointed out areas for needed improvement or

additional resources. EDs expressed the desire for more attention to be paid to the Holocaust and Israel within the SL values curriculum. One ED underscored her desire for students to develop “a feeling for Israel.” Students also told us that they are curious about these topics as part of a larger interest in learning about Jewish history.

Holocaust. It’s an imperative, especially [because] we’ve had a number of kids who have had incidents, swastikas on notebooks and stuff, and name-calling. The name-calling is just rampant. (ED)

I’d like to learn about the birth of Israel, and how it evolved into how it is today. (Student)

Educators noted that some materials seemed out of date and included cultural references that were unfamiliar to students. They were also sensitive to materials that might communicate messages that ran counter to their school’s denominational outlook. For example, teachers were uncomfortable when male characters in a video were all depicted as wearing *kippot*.

Figure 6: Perceived contribution of SL values curriculum

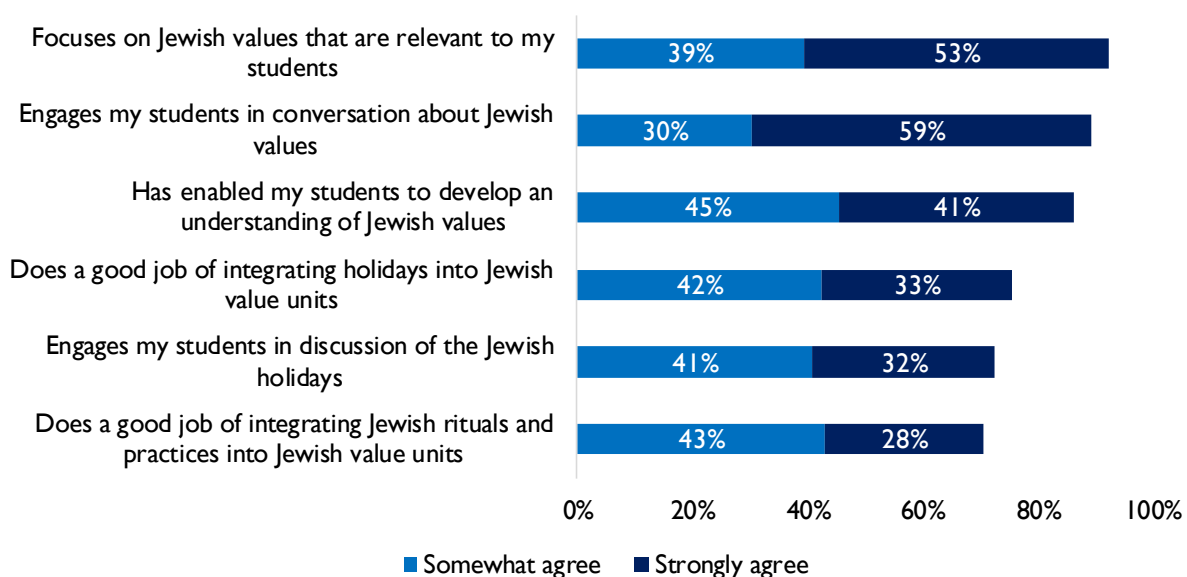
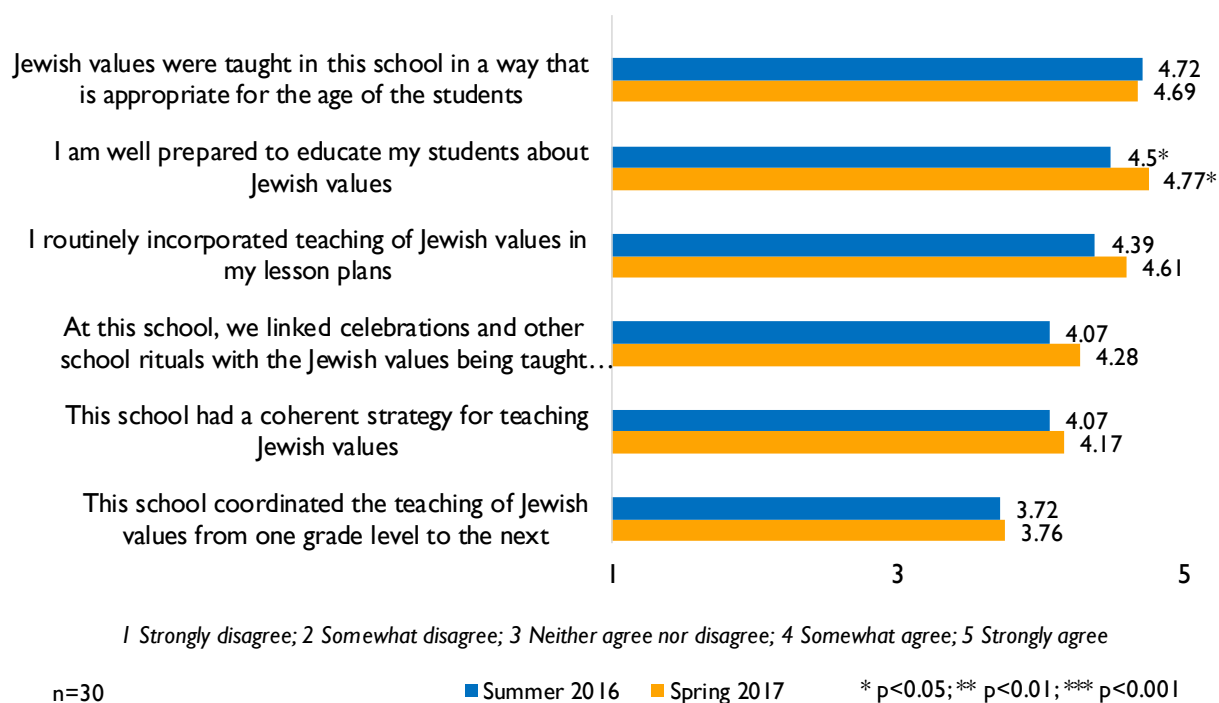


Figure 7: Impact on Jewish values education: Mean ratings



I would say the video clips in particular, they sort of miss the mark. Like that one seems like it's trying to be contemporary, but it's not. There's a clip about the Fonz in the fifth grade, the first teshuvah unit. The message is good, it's just too out of date for them to be able to relate to it.

Videos are sourced from Aish and come with troubling theological implications.

Educators also expressed their desire for additional methods and materials to reinforce SL values learning over the course of the school year. They pointed out that by incorporating more resources for scaffolding the lessons throughout the other parts of the supplementary school experience, students could have more opportunities to review and remember the target values. Both teachers and

students mentioned that they are looking for clear moments of review and transition as they go through the lessons. One ED told us, "There's a piece missing in the curriculum: a review system," and then recounted that to fill this gap, one of the teachers at her school was using a "tool chest" that would serve as a reminder of the lessons the class had already covered.

What students take away from SL values curriculum

The effect of the SL values curriculum on student learning can be seen through a comparison of student comprehension of the target values between Fall 2016 (when their schools had just begun to use the SL curriculum) and Spring 2017. In the first

round of focus groups, most students were unable to say anything about any of the SL values. They often told us that they had never heard of the values, did not recall learning about them in prior years, and were unsure what these values meant or how they related to Jewish thought and practice.

At the end of the year, students, as part of focus groups, completed a worksheet listing the names (in Hebrew and English) of the values they covered in class. They were asked to write what they learned about each value and/or give examples of class activities related to that value. As shown in Table 1, almost three-quarters (73%) of students remembered something about their lessons on *Teshuvah*, and two-thirds were able to recall information related to the values of *B'Tzelem Elohim* (67%), *Achrayut* (65%), and *Koach HaDibbur* (65%). Over half recalled *Gevurah* (56%) and *HaKarat HaTov* (52%). Very few of the classes had started the unit on *Shalom* when the focus groups were conducted and, accordingly, only a small portion of students (17%) could recall material from this set of lessons.

Students described connecting strongly with lessons that related to their everyday lives. They appreciated the opportunity to examine the issues they face through a Jewish lens.

Some values clearly stood out for students as particularly relevant, memorable, or personally important. Students frequently mentioned the values of *Achrayut*, *B'tzelem Elohim*, and *Gevurah* as fitting into this category. For some students, it was a particular element (often a video or activity) of the SL lesson that stayed with them and was personally meaningful.

I remember Achrayut because we watched a video where a guy picks up money that someone dropped and saw that the check attached to the fifty dollar bill had a specific bank on it, and he returned the money to the bank.

We saw this video about this man who, when he couldn't even afford to get things for himself, he put bananas around an old woman's doorknob every day, and she never knew that he did it. He always gave money to the same homeless person every day...the last bit of his money. He always watered this plant. He always fed this dog whenever he got food. And then he always helped this woman cross the street. He was really nice about it. When he couldn't even do that stuff for himself.

I like Gevurah because I remember watching a video on the story of David and Goliath where it was Goliath was this big man, really strong. And David was kind of scrawny, but he had inner strength, and he started to play a guitar, and for some reason that

Table 1: Students recall of SL values

		% Able to recall
N=86		
<i>Teshuvah</i>	Taking responsibility for your actions	73%
<i>B'Tzelem Elohim</i>	Honoring the image of G-d in yourself	67%
<i>Achrayut</i>	Making the world a better place	65%
<i>Koach HaDibbur</i>	Understanding the power of words	65%
<i>Gevurah</i>	Using your strength	56%
<i>HaKarat HaTov</i>	Seeking joy and being grateful	52%
<i>Shalom</i>	Creating a peaceful world	17%

defeated Goliath because he [David] had inner strength while Goliath was just strong on the outside. And I guess inner strength in a way kind of beats out outer strength and being strong.

Koach HaDibbur was really fun because we made a skit about bullies and how they can be changed.

[Koach HaDibbur] Understanding the power of words was the most fun, and the thing that we went into depth with. We listed leaders that used the power of words. So, I really thought that was really interesting, and was the most important.

We did this example of Shira, Brenda, and this other person. And then we did a skit, Brenda was mad at Shira for not scoring the goal, and then Brenda told the other person that Shira was the worst player of all time. And then whoever that person was told Shira, and then Shira wouldn't speak to Brenda. And then we talked about who should forgive who.

Students also told us that they were able to incorporate Jewish values into discussions with peers and family and link them to relevant situations in their own lives. Students recounted instances where the material covered in a SL lesson resonated with their personal experience and led them to think differently about how they had acted in the past and how they would act differently in the future.

Last week [we] were just talking about forgiveness. I've had a time when I had to say sorry, or I've had a time when I've had to forgive a friend for doing something. Talking about it helps, sort of. I feel like it can help next time it happens.

Well, the Achrayut stuff, we did that this month... There were lots of different specific rules about what you have to do if you find a certain thing, or if you find a thing in the river or water or in this place or that place or how big is it or how much it's worth. There's always more you can do to give someone back what they lost.

I think it's a reminder. If someone's acting mean or doing something rude or something that you don't like, it's sometimes good to remember B'tzelem Elohim and remember that they're not some devilish creature. They're also made in the image of God so you shouldn't hurt them.

It affected my everyday life because it's not only learning about what you should do and what you shouldn't do, but it's related more to you—what you should be careful about. It's like saying you should change this way because it's better for you. And it's more like treat others the way you want to be treated.

Many students also mentioned specific instances of putting the values they learned through SL into practice in their lives. Students discussed examples of standing up for themselves or friends, treating others respectfully, or looking for tangible ways to make the world a better place.

We learned a lot about teshuvah, and I used... cheshbon ha'nefesh, taking inventory of the soul. I thought a lot about that.

B'tzelem Elohim really spoke out to me because I tend to be very hard on myself with sports and schoolwork. I kind of translated B'tzelem Elohim to treating yourself well. And it just helped me think more about just how I can not only treat others nicely, but also I shouldn't beat myself up over small stuff.

I get bullied sometimes, and I never really want to stand up for myself. I don't want to act like a fool or get in trouble. But since watching that video, or even just in general, knowing that my parents have my back, I kinda stand up for myself.

I think some of the values related to some experiences I had in my life, so I remembered a bit better. Oh, Gevurah because a lot of the sports offered at my school, it's hard to get on the team because you have to try out and they're picky. A bunch of the kids were telling my friends that even if they tried out, they

weren't going to make it. I ended up convincing them to try out, and they actually made the team.

I remember after learning about Achrayut... I've always been into the environment and trying to help. But this really made me think not just about the environment and not just about the world itself, like nature, but more about people in the world...we're kind of in a safe bubble and I wasn't that aware...I started looking into it, and there's a lot of things that I can actively help with.

At two schools, students reported that ideas learned through the SL curriculum, especially those related to *Achrayut*, helped shape their bar/bat mitzvah projects. One student told us that he would soon be delivering comic books to a police station for kids who were taken away from their homes and linked this project to what he had learned about *Achrayut*.

For our bat mitzvah project we have to do something to help our community. And after I learned about Achrayut, I started looking around at what needed help and that gave me more ideas about what I wanted to do for my bat mitzvah project. And so I went and asked people about if they needed help, like reading at a public library, or something like that, the little kids. With Achrayut, I also worked on my mitzvah project. I was selling items for a dollar or two so then I could get up to like \$500 to send a kid to camp for a weekend.

Impact on teachers' use of technology in the classroom

Teachers entered SL with strong positive perspectives on the use of technology in education and did not significantly change these opinions over the course of the school year. All of the teachers from the Summer 2016 retreat responding to the Spring 2017 survey agreed somewhat or strongly that technology is an effective means for engaging students, and 93% agreed that it enables a teacher to reach students in a way that would otherwise not be possible. Most (83%) agreed that using technology has the capacity to make one a better teacher, and almost the same portion (80%) agreed that it is engaging for the teachers themselves. These high levels of agreement with the value of technology were consistent across the year as evidenced by the lack of significant difference between means from the Summer 2016 survey compared with the Spring 2017 survey (Figure 8).

A comparison of teachers' responses to the Summer 2016 and Spring 2017 surveys indicates that using SL significantly increased their confidence in using technology in the classroom (Figure 9). Teachers showed significant gains in their confidence in creating a PowerPoint presentation, uploading and editing videos, facilitating an online class, downloading content, setting up web-conferencing, streaming video content, accessing web content on mobile devices, and asking questions and responding to students via the Internet.

Figure 8: Educators' perceptions of the value of technology in supplementary education: Mean ratings

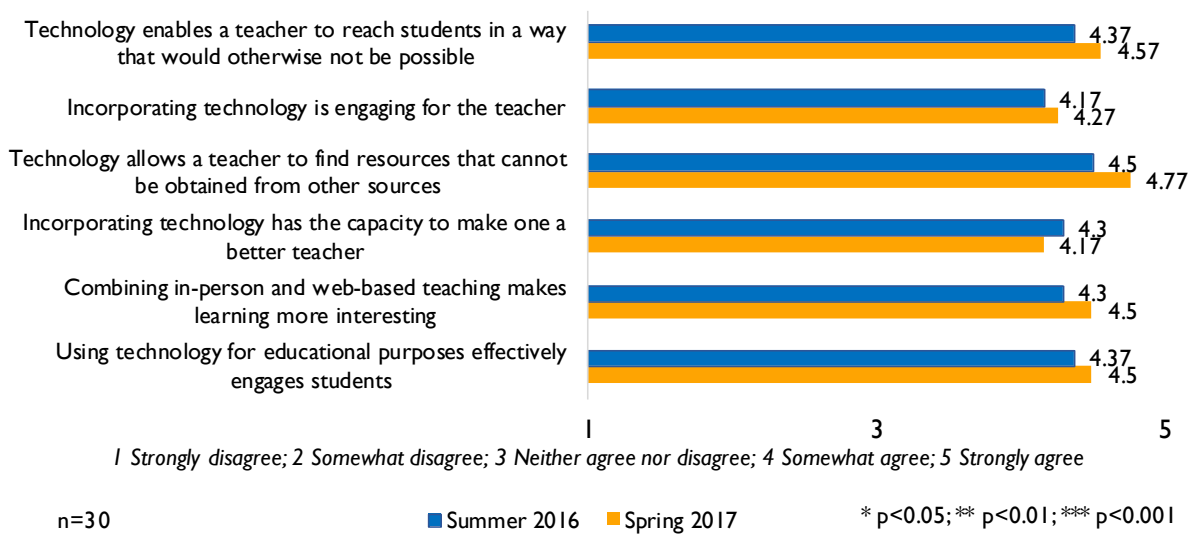
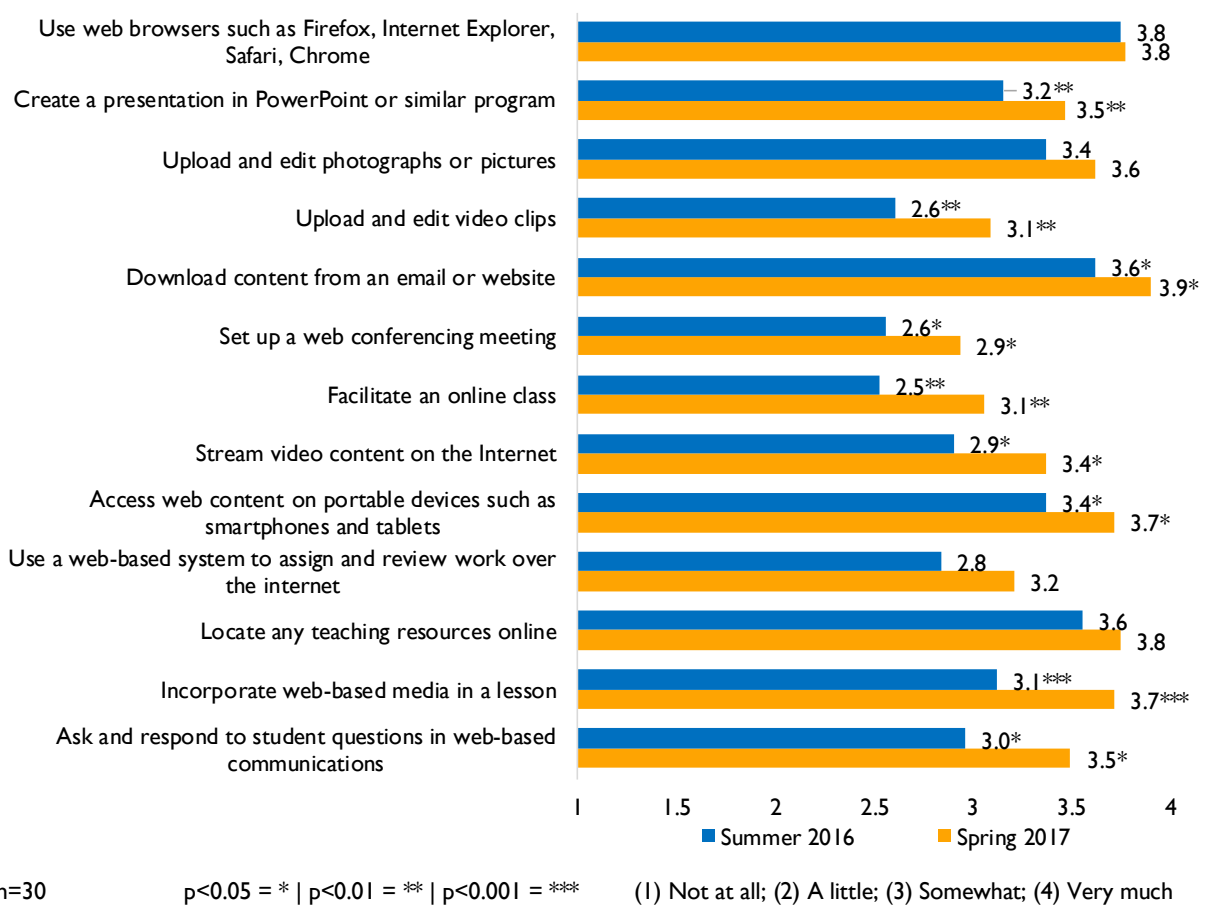


Figure 9: Impact on educators' confidence in use of educational technology



Teacher reactions to SL Hebrew curriculum

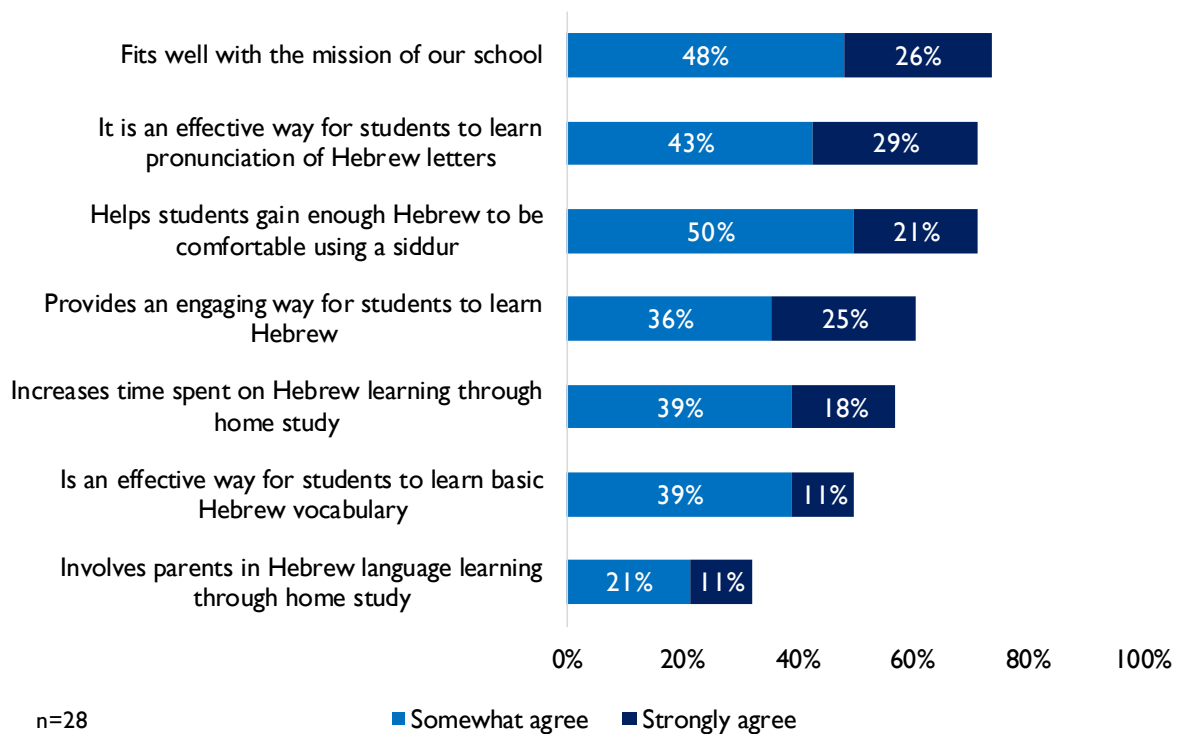
The SL Hebrew curriculum was used in 12 of the schools surveyed. Of these, nine employed only Torah Aura materials, and three used both Torah Aura and OJL lessons. Educators that used the Hebrew curriculum were quite positive about it in the Spring 2017 survey (Figure 10). Almost three-quarters (72%) agreed, at least somewhat, that it is an effective way for students to learn pronunciation, and 71% agreed that it helps students gain sufficient Hebrew to be comfortable using a Hebrew prayer book. A majority also agreed that the curriculum provides an engaging way for students to learn Hebrew (61%) and increases time spent in Hebrew home study (57%). Half agreed that it

is effective in building vocabulary. One-third (32%) agreed it involves parents in home study.

Educators using the Hebrew curriculum also commented that it was not as well-developed as the SL values curriculum. Some noted that the Hebrew curriculum lacked the variety of materials or the specific instructions available with the values curriculum. Some noted that the online materials did not differ markedly from those available in print.

It's clear that ShalomLearning focused on the Judaic side of their curriculum and not on their Hebrew [Torah Aura]. They're working on their Hebrew, but it's not there yet... That's the part of the ShalomLearning that wasn't developed enough.

Figure 10: Teacher impressions of SL Hebrew curriculum



Most of our teachers I would say are just sort of coming up with [activities] on their own or by brainstorming together with their colleagues or with us. I would say for the Hebrew, we have ended up using some of the books that we have to supplement for the Hebrew.

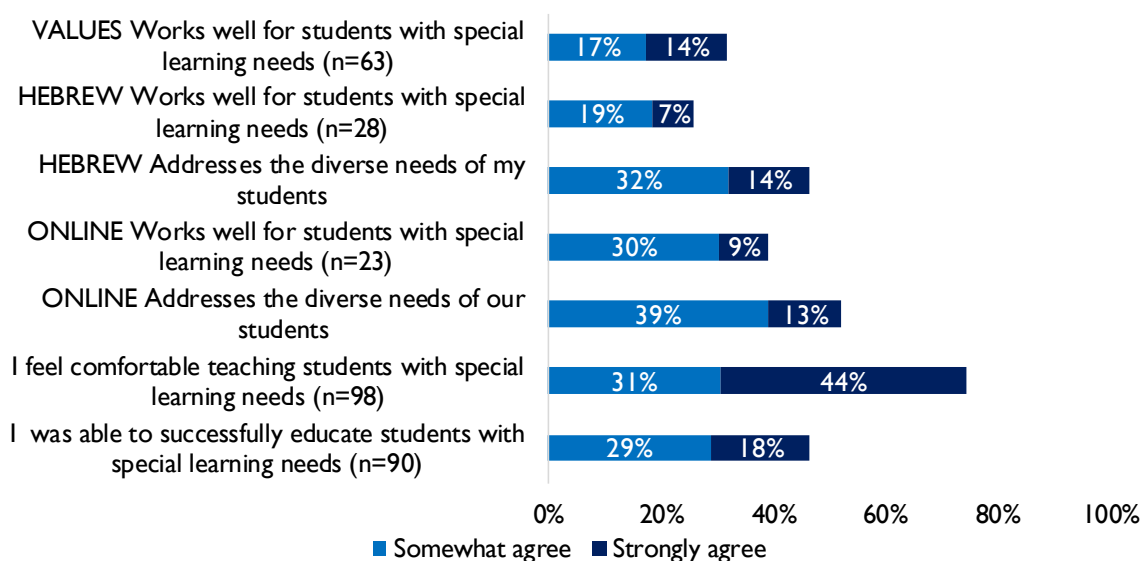
Several teachers and EDs noted that language learning, especially decoding skills related to a new alphabet, require tactile connection with the material. Students benefit from being able to follow along in the text with their fingers or to use paper and pencil materials to manipulate the letters and words in games and activities.

For some of the kids it's really hard to be looking up at the screen. Our kids need something right in front of them. When you're teaching Hebrew, you want them to be following along with their finger. You might be breaking up the syllables for them. And so, what we thought is we really do in the classroom need paper, even if we want them at home to also be using online for [Hebrew].

Using SL to educate students with special needs

One of the goals of SL was to develop a curriculum that could be adapted to the diverse learning needs and styles of the full spectrum of students. Responding to the Spring 2017 survey, three-quarters (75%) of educators somewhat or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable teaching students with special learning needs, although a much smaller portion (47%) agreed that they were able to successfully educate these students (Figure 11). Fewer than one-third (31%) of those who taught with the values curriculum in 2016-17 agreed that it works well for students with special learning needs, and only 26% of those who taught the Hebrew curriculum agreed it works well for such students. Forty-six percent agreed that the SL Hebrew curriculum addresses the diverse needs of all students.

Figure 11: Use of SL with students with special learning needs



Interviews with EDs revealed their concerns with using the SL curriculum with students with special learning needs. Some noted that PowerPoint presentations worked well with visual learners but not as well for others and may not capture the attention of easily distractible students. Others described the unique challenges of addressing individual learning needs within the virtual classroom.

I think that keeping in mind the other kinds of learners is important. It was an online class, and that's much harder to address different learners in an online class setting.

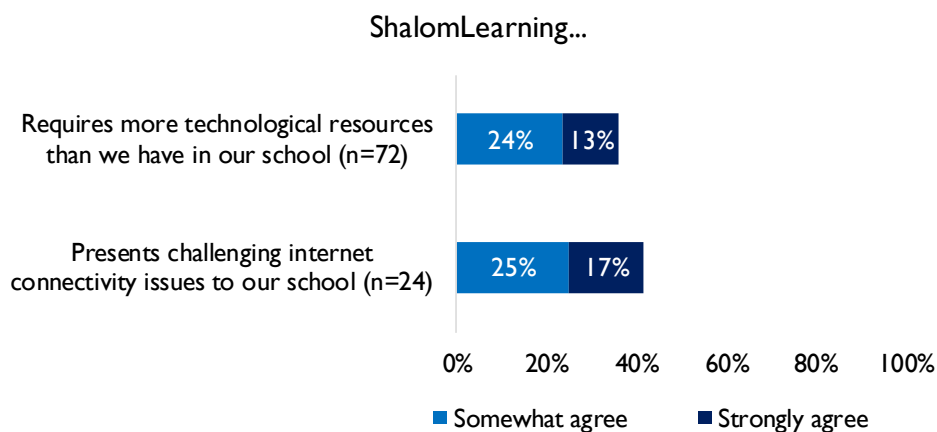
Technology and use of SL curricula

Interviews, school visits, and surveys revealed that many schools lacked the technological resources or expertise to enable full implementation or smooth use of SL curricula. Responding to the Spring 2017 survey, one-third (37%) of teachers agreed at least somewhat that implementation of SL requires more technological resources than are available at their school (Figure 12). About the same portion agreed that they encountered challenges connecting to the Internet in their school buildings. Connectivity issues persisted despite SL's shift to Schoology and BigBlueButton.

One educator characterized her teachers' responses to SL as "overwhelming frustration with the technology." Educators described a lack of sufficient dedicated laptops or desktop computers for their students. Several teachers described bringing their own computers to school to use with SL PowerPoint presentations in class but still facing the challenge of having to share a limited number of projectors with other classrooms. Some teachers using the virtual classroom capability of SL noted that the platform was not optimized for use on tablets or smart phones, the devices to which students have easiest access. The resulting reliance on parents' laptops may have restricted student usage.

The costs associated with the technology are an issue for some schools. These include buying laptops for teachers or students, as well as paying for Fuze or Adobe Connect. In 2016-17 some schools were still using Fuze because Adobe Connect was more expensive. Even in schools committed to the idea of blended education, EDs were not sure whether the congregation would fund the investment in technology that optimal use of SL would require.

Figure 12: Availability of technological resources



We put in a proposal, actually, to add tablets and projectors for every room. I don't know where we are with that...the kids really just like sitting around the laptops, but I think it would be nice also to have a bigger screen for them to look at.

In interviews, EDs and teachers commented on the difficulties encountered in using the LMS, including logging on. As one ED told us, the LMS was “a little bit cumbersome in terms of the interface for teachers,” a sentiment that was echoed by other teachers and EDs.

[Teachers] have to go back and download all the links and videos. It's a pain. SL should have two tracks, one where it's totally online using Schoology, and another that [is] downloadable as a traditional curriculum with lesson plans with embedded links—so that it's all in one place.

SL provides a variety of means for educators to learn more about how to use their technology. During the 2016-17 school year, over half (56%) of teachers reported that they used the self-paced training through MyShalomLearning, and one-third participated in one-on-one sessions with SL staff to address technical issues.

Teachers and EDs were highly positive and appreciative of the technical support they received from SL staff. They felt that SL staff were responsive, approachable, and helpful. Several EDs noted how valuable it was to have a SL staff person come to their school for in-person instruction and consultation.

I think that is an area that they really excel in.

We had [SL staff person] in January. It was totally awesome...She was here, and she could be specific and she could answer the questions that the teachers had.

ShalomLearning...just really responsive and supportive.

Building a community of practice among educators

SL provides several ongoing and annual opportunities for educators to develop their skills and connections with peers involved in supplementary education. As shown in Table 2, just over half (54%) of teachers reported any engagement with the ShalomConnect online space for teachers. Forty-five percent participated in SL webinars, and one-third attended a summer retreat.

Table 2: Teachers' participation in SL community building activities

Activity	% Involved 2016-17
ShalomConnect	54%
SL Webinars	45%
Summer retreat	33%

Conclusions and Recommendations

Jewish education is being challenged to provide answers to a different set of questions today than it did through much of the 20th century—not how to be Jewish or even why to be Jewish, but how Jewishness makes a difference in individuals' lives and for the world (Woocher & Woocher, 2014).

The challenge of making supplementary Jewish education meaningful and relevant has become a perennial conversation in the Jewish press and in synagogues across North America (Woocher et al., 2010). With its focus on Jewish values and incorporating blended education, SL was designed to connect students with Jewish learning through a technological medium they have come to expect.

Overall, teacher, ED, and student responses to the SL curricula were very positive. Educators found the SL values curriculum to be relevant to their students and an effective means for engaging them in conversations about Jewish values. Through their SL experience, educators gained confidence in their ability to make use of diverse online platforms, resources, and materials. Both novice and seasoned teachers appreciated the quality of lessons and the variety of materials, activities, and media they incorporated. Students agreed and appreciated the focus on Jewish values that connect to the difficult decisions they face in their own lives. At the end of the school year, students vividly recalled examples from SL videos or lessons that resonated with their lives. When students were given the opportunity to discuss these values with peers in the classroom and to engage in hands-on activities, their understanding and internalization of Jewish values was strengthened.

Although used in fewer schools, the SL Hebrew curriculum also received praise from educators. They found it an engaging and effective way for students to learn pronunciation and to become more comfortable with using a Hebrew prayer book. Teachers also agreed that it increases the time spent in Hebrew home study, a critical ingredient for language learning.

The findings of this evaluation indicate that SL has made great strides toward developing a well received and effective set of curricula. We also observed the responsiveness of SL to educator input and the continued growth and development of the curriculum and platform.

The responses of teachers, EDs, and students also suggest several areas for improvement. These suggestions include continuing to develop the values and Hebrew curricula, address technology issues, expand strategies for reaching parents, and develop communities of practice among educators.

Continued development of the values and Hebrew curricula: As a spiral curriculum, the challenge for SL is to make the values seem fresh and alive as the students move from grade to grade. In a similar vein, SL needs to develop additional strategies to help teachers reinforce the Jewish values covered in class within a grade so that students are reminded of values learned earlier in the year. Continuing to review the values will bolster the values' connections to students' everyday lives in an ongoing manner. Examples of this can be found in the use of SL values in creating meaningful bar/bat mitzvah projects. Both students and teachers found the hands-on activities in the SL curriculum to be especially memorable and effective. SL should continue to expand its educational resources

by providing suggestions for in-class activities that result in tactile and visual reinforcement of values.

Educators also expressed the need for the values curriculum to include more on Israel and the Holocaust. This might entail providing more examples and resources to integrate the SL values into lessons about these topics.

Part of the power of the SL values curriculum is its connection to contemporary culture and media. This requires keeping the content current and relevant. The SL team will have to stay abreast of the music, language, and other cultural trends students are experiencing and continue to curate the curriculum by replacing materials that are dated. Educators also expressed their preference for media and materials that depict a more pluralistic perspective on Judaism and better reflect participating congregations.

Educators are also looking for more ways to personalize and manipulate SL materials to better serve their students, especially those with special learning needs. Providing options within lesson plans for addressing categories of learning needs, or making SL materials searchable by keywords across lessons and grades, would give educators greater flexibility to use their own creativity and knowledge of the needs of their students and schools.

The Hebrew curriculum presents an area of great potential for SL. Learning Hebrew, or any language, within a one hour time slot each week does not work for most students. Utilizing the Hebrew curriculum online is potentially of great value to bolster language skills. Currently, however, the Hebrew curriculum is not as well developed as the values curriculum. Additional development should include more ways for students to connect with the language through online and in-person games and activities.

Addressing technology issues: Perennial problems for SL, as for any blended curriculum, are connectivity and equipment. In many schools, teachers cannot easily connect to SL or reliably download materials for class. The Wi-Fi connection in many supplementary school buildings is uneven and slows down considerably when multiple users simultaneously stream media. These connectivity issues limit the ease with which teachers can use SL curricula and should garner more attention from SL. This might take the form of consultation to schools about how they can “map” connectivity throughout their buildings and steps they can take to upgrade this resource where needed.

Educators also face limitations in the equipment available to them. They often have to bring their own laptops into class to share SL PowerPoints or share a single projector with multiple classrooms. Rarely are supplementary schools equipped with sufficient PCs or laptops for each student. SL might consider taking steps to optimize its materials for use on smartphones and tablets, the devices to which students have easiest access. SL might also explore the potential for helping schools purchase projectors and laptops.

SL has already shown commitment to providing resources for professional development through educator retreats, webinars, and one-on-one meetings. To date, the on-site consultations have won considerable praise from EDs, and for many schools were a necessary component of the successful implementation of SL. Continuing to build on this foundation of professional development to advance educator skills with technology and in using the curriculum will strengthen SL’s impact in the classroom and online.

Creating communities of practice: The shared use of the SL curriculum provides a fertile foundation for building connections among EDs and teachers across supplementary schools. Communities of practice might form around each curriculum or in relation to specific shared challenges, such as how to address different learning styles or needs. SL's position within Hebrew College should enable it to draw on some of the leading scholars in Jewish education to lead or contribute to these communities of practice. Expanding the use of ShalomConnect and the SL webinars around key topics such as engaging parents, editing lesson plans, and integrating Hebrew throughout the supplementary school experience could help educators advance in their use of the curriculum. Building a toolkit of additional resources, such as a bank of activities that could be incorporated into lessons and additional discussion questions, would create more opportunities for teachers to personalize and expand on the curriculum. Connecting existing SL schools with schools that are just starting with the curriculum or with those that have not been able to reach the full potential of the curriculum may help to push forward the use of blended education and educational technology in supplementary education.

Engaging parents: Family involvement has long been recognized as key to successful Jewish education (Sales et al., 2000). Currently, only a handful of schools are using SL materials to reach parents or bring them into the conversation on Jewish values. Expanding the use of these materials would enable parents to continue the conversation about Jewish values with their children beyond the supplementary school setting. SL should focus attention on helping schools develop strategies for parent involvement that fit local realities and parent availability. This is another instance where the sharing of best practices among schools using SL might be helpful.

The current research provides a one-year snapshot of SL's substantial strides toward developing an effective, creative, and accessible approach to supplementary education. The spiral nature of the SL values curriculum, with students encountering the same seven core values across grade levels, suggests that future research should focus on the longitudinal impact of the program.

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Brandeis University



Maurice and Marilyn Cohen
Center for Modern Jewish Studies