

Torah at the Center

Jewish and...: Helping Our Students Navigate Their Multiple Identities

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In our increasingly diverse and multi-cultural world, children recognize and celebrate their multiple identities. This is encouraged in their homes, in their schools and by the popular culture around them. Their lives are filled with a myriad of different foods, customs and holidays. They do not necessarily place a greater value on any one identity but rather live these identities side-by-side and often simultaneously. Being an African-American Jew or a Chinese-American Jew or a Gay or Lesbian Jew can be an identity in itself.

Our religious schools have precious little time to accomplish a task of overwhelming proportions. In addition to education, our schools play an important role in the identity formation of our students. Of course, the identity we are trying to help them form is their Jewish identity. With so little time, acknowledging the multiple identities of our students may be challenging and frustrating.

When faced with a student's multiple identities, it may be tempting to respond that this is "Hebrew School" and so the focus will be on Jewish identity. As teachers, we may not be familiar with the many cultures, ethnicities and experiences that make up our student's identities. However, if the message we send is that Judaism does not value one's entire identity, our children of multiple identities may come to believe that Judaism does not value them at all. Rather than be threatened or confounded, our task is to embrace these students and all of the identities they bring in to our classrooms.

Include opportunities in your lessons for students to share their family observances and celebrations. Sometimes students are excited to share with their classmates, and other times they are testing to see if we will be comfortable with their multiple identities. By creating opportunities for sharing, we can communicate to all of our students that it is possible to be, for example, both Jewish *and* Hispanic. Pointing out the similarities between Judaism and some of the ethnicities and cultures with which the students identify can be a part of the lesson.

Many curriculums include a study of family genealogy and history. For children of different cultures it is important that they know that we are interested not only in their Jewish genealogy, but in their entire heritage. This is an opportunity to educate students about Jewish communities around the world, such as the Jewish communities in China, India and Ethiopia. For children of adoption, this could be an opportunity to learn about adoption in Jewish history, including Abraham and his nephew Lot and Pharaoh's daughter and Moses.

Recently, I visited the classroom of a highly regarded and popular third grade religious school teacher. She was teaching a lesson about the blessings and rituals of the Shabbat table. This teacher used a number of tools and methods in order to reach a variety of different learners. The students were active and engaged in the lesson. However, the teacher framed the lesson in very hetero-normative terms. She spoke of the "*ima*" lighting the candles and the "*abba*" saying the *Kiddush*. When it came time to model these behaviors, the teacher selected only girls to light the candles and only boys to say the *Kiddush* or *Motzi*.

I happen to know that among the students in this class were a child with two mothers and another child with a non-Jewish parent who did not participate in the Jewish life of the family. There may also have been children in the class from single parent families. At best, these children may have felt left out of this lesson and at worst, may have been disappointed or even angry that their family was not reflected in the family portrayed by their teacher. Taught with a few modifications, this lesson could have made every child feel included. Rather than feel that they could not observe Shabbat because their family did not reflect the family in the teacher's lesson, each child could have imagined how his or her own family would celebrate Shabbat.

By creating the space in our schools for children to affirm their multiple identities completely, honestly and proudly, we teach our students that whatever they are, they are Jewish, and the Jewish community embraces them.