MONTREAL JEWISH DAY SCHOOL TEACHERS' REAL-TIME EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Montreal Jewish Day Schools shifted to online distance learning. This study follows eight elementary and high school teachers in real-time through observations and group interviews. Applying a Community of Inquiry framework, we unpack the social, conceptual, and pedagogical elements of this pedagogical shift to understand its three "modes": survival, transition, and innovation, distinguished by stability and connectivity. Peer-to-peer and student-teacher connectivity was mostly underdeveloped and fostered feelings of disappointment and frustration. Teachers varied in their engagement with specific Judaic traditions within their online classrooms and relied on school-wide resources to sustain Jewish identity connectivity for students. The ever-changing timeline of the shifts in conjunction with personally- and community- attributed pressures contributed to teachers' experiences of anxiety.

LES EXPÉRIENCES EN TEMPS RÉEL DES ENSEIGNANT·E·S DES ÉCOLES JUIVES DE MONTRÉAL DURANT L'ENSEIGNEMENT À DISTANCE EN LIGNE PENDANT LA COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ. Durant la pandémie de la COVID-19, les écoles juives de Montréal ont adopté l'enseignement en ligne. Cette étude suit en temps réel huit enseignant·e·s du primaire et du secondaire au moyen d'observations et d'entretiens de groupe. En mobilisant le cadre de la Communauté d'enquête, nous analysons les dimensions sociales, conceptuelles et pédagogiques de ce virage selon trois « modes » : survie, transition et innovation, qui se distinguent par leur stabilité et leur niveau de connectivité. Les enseignant·e·s ont adapté leur recours aux traditions juives et se sont appuyées sur les ressources scolaires pour soutenir la continuité de l'identité juive. La connectivité entre les enseignant·e·s et leurs élèves demeurait limitée, et l'évolution constante des changements contribuait à générer de l'anxiété.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, Montreal elementary and high schools closed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. By the following Monday morning, the Jewish Day Schools were introducing online platforms for at-home distance learning. Covid-19 measures would end up lasting until the end of the school year, directly affecting teachers and communities as short-term adjustments became long term solutions. The pedagogical shift went beyond changing schedules and curricular priorities to transforming teachers' professional roles. At the onset of quarantine, it was thought that at-home online distance learning would be transitory: only two weeks, which stretched into four weeks, then two months. Finally, the Quebec government and Ministry of Education decided to remain online for the duration of the school year. Amid such a crisis, the experiences of teachers at 'street-level' deserve specific narration. Using a Community of Inquiry framework (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Garrison, 2017), this research asks if a common pedagogical goal between Jewish Day Schools was established despite fluctuating government mandates. As a methodology, Community of Inquiry relies on group dialogue and reflection to document and understand both individual experiences and shared experiences. It is important to note that in the context of this research, the Community of Inquiry approach is conceptually separate from that of *community,* which we define as a sense of belonging to the Montreal Jewish Community. A sense of identity as belonging to *this* community is one that students and teachers may or may not connect with, given the many Jewish sub-communities. These sub-communities are expressed through differences in specific religious denominations, represented in different schools.

Our initial interest was in widening the scope of an ongoing research project on documentation of pedagogical support to Hassidic children and their parents in their homeschooling curriculum (Hirsch, et al., 2020). However, it rapidly became clear that the online distance learning proposed by the Jewish day schools during the pandemic was of a different nature from this homeschooling set-up, especially from teachers' points of view and we shifted course to document processes happening in Jewish day schools in Montreal.

In the specific context of the Jewish Day School system, the pre-existing community dynamic is important. The religious identity of each school has an important role in establishing and strengthening Jewish identity (Hirsch, 2019). Despite differences in religious denomination, Jewish day schools build—and rely—on shared values; maintaining students' sense of belonging within the Montreal Jewish Community, a composite and pluralistic identity, is a key aspect of the mission of each school (Hirsch, 2016). How does a pre-established sense of community impact online

distance learning in social, conceptual and pedagogical ways? Though individual classrooms and teachers navigated changes during the pandemic, it was a community as a whole that shifted their concept of schooling, and perhaps their group identity dynamic along with it. The present article represents one aspect of the larger research project, wherein students and parents were engaged to reflect on the shift they experienced. In this article, we focus on teachers' pedagogical shifts mid-crisis, which we look at through three transitional modes: survival, transition and innovation. By following the experiences of teachers in real time, we can understand what it might mean to be at the forefront of rapid pedagogical change. Understanding these experiences may help to better prepare schools to respond within a global digital world in which viral outbreak preparation becomes the new normal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research seeks to describe pedagogical shifts from traditional instruction to online distance learning. We use the term 'online distance learning' although it implies a very different reality than the one usually described by this concept. When planning for online distance learning, teachers tend to carefully pre-plan how to establish a sense of community for a group of learners coming together for the first time through digital platforms (Lohr & Haley, 2018; Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018; Fisher & Tucker, 2004). In the case of the present research, the school and class groups were already established; moreover, learners also had community identities established through their shared connection to their specific Jewish communities.

A Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is frequently used in research on online distance learning and e-learning (Garrison, 2017) because both share the pedagogical goal of establishing a learning community while pursuing common academic objectives (Bektashi, 2018). CoI models consider the connectivity of participants at the intersection of conceptual, social and pedagogical needs (Bektashi, 2018; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Akyol and Garrison (2008) locate CoI at the centre of three "presences": *conceptual* presence, or the ability of learners to construct learning through critical dialogue and reflection; *social* presence, or the ability of learners to experience connectivity with their learning community; and *teaching* presence, or the intentional design of instruction for meaningful learning (Bektashi, 2018; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). We build on CoI language of connectivity to understand teacher decision making (Fiock, 2020) within layered communities shifting to this learning model mid-crisis, using CoI's language of "connectivity" to analyze teachers' experiences

within the multiple communities to which they belong, unpacking their feelings of connection or disconnection. We inquire into teachers' sense of whether they were able to establish connectivity *with* their students, *among* their students, and *between* their students and their Jewish communities.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, three schools within the Montreal Jewish Day School system participated. Each school has a unique identity in terms of religious lifestyle. We have looked at these identities in past research (Hirsch, 2019), emphasizing the differences and similarities between these schools in terms of the place religious aspects occupy in school days and among the families populating them (Table 1). Despite differences between each school group's associated Jewish community connection, essential elements for implementation of online distance learning were shared, including: (1) supportive administrative structures (Aldhafeeri & Khan, 2016; Kreijns, Van Acker, Vermeulen & Van Buuren, 2014) and (2) community-building incorporated into the curriculum as a pedagogical goal (Lohr & Haley, 2018; Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018; Fisher & Tucker, 2004).

While the first school (School A) serves families that are mainly *shomer shabbat*[1], the second one (School B) welcomes families that are fairly observant and largely attached to the Sephardic[2] tradition. School C is less observant. In School A, a modern orthodox school, the administration considers religious life to be a part of family life, so little time is given to formally teach religious practices such as prayer and *kabbalat shabbat*[3]. The school concentrates instead on practicing these within the school curriculum. The two other schools see religious rituals as integral to their curriculum, ensuring that the children will become functional members of the Jewish community. All three schools follow the Jewish calendar, presenting in detail the different holidays and Jewish history in Hebrew. The Jewish studies curriculum, unique to each school, is paired with bilingual secular studies that support a shared educational mission to prepare students for the modern Quebec and global society, incorporating digital technologies across both secular and religious studies. Prior to the shift to the Covid-19 online distance learning, all three schools infused technology into the classrooms to varying degrees to support the Quebec curriculum.

TABLE 1. Profiles of participating schools, displaying religious identities

A	Modern orthodox	Part of the school's daily life and defines its community	Students are mainly shomer shabbat
B	Sephardic Tradition/Modern Orthodox	Religious rituals at school	Students' homes are more or less observant
C	Communal, conservative	Religious rituals at school	Students' homes are more or less observant

The focus of this study was on describing the lived experiences of teachers through this rapid pedagogical shift. A total of eight teachers accepted our invitation to participate, either through direct communication or recommendation through the school's administrative team. It was our intent to seek a group of participants within each school who would show a range in age, comfort with educational technologies, language of instruction (English, French, and Hebrew), and grade level of students.

Information regarding comfort with technology was gathered during an initial group interview with each school group. A low comfort with technology was marked by confessions of significant anxiety or nervousness around the transition to online distance learning with minimal self-reporting of classroom integration of educational technologies. A medium comfort level was characterized by frequent personal use of technology with some integration of educational technologies in the classroom and an acknowledgement of their significance in online distance learning. A high comfort level was marked by teachers who self-reported as being resources to their teaching peers in integrating educational technologies into the classroom or as resources during the transition to online distance learning platforms, including Google Meet and Zoom.

Under the Quebec Education Program, grade level is organized by 'cycles', with each cycle composed of two grade levels (e.g., Cycle One incorporates grades one and two). Teachers within each cycle may teach one or both grade levels, however curricula across levels are similar. The Montreal Jewish Day schools (which we also call 'mainstream' Jewish schools) organize themselves tri-lingually; each grade level class interacts with three separate teachers each day (Hirsch, 2019). Thus, teachers usually teach at least two different grade levels. The following tables synthesize the profiles

of the teacher participants, first by school (Table 2), then by shared characteristics (Table 3). Throughout the text, teachers will be mentioned by an alphabetic code (e.g., "Teacher A"), as opposed to name or pseudonym; the naming system reflects initial order of speaking in the transcripts and has no association to their school group.

TABLE 2. Teacher profiles by school

	School A	School B	School C
Total Number of Teacher Participants	3	3	2
Age	Under 40: 2 Over 40: 1	Under 40:1 Over 40: 2	Under 40: 2 Over 40: 0
Comfort with Technology	Low: 0 Medium: 2 High: 1	Low: 1 Medium: 2 High: 0	Low: 0 Medium: 1 High: 1
Language of Instruction	English: 1 French: 1 Hebrew: 1	English: 0 French: 2 Hebrew: 1	English: 1 French: 1 Hebrew: 0
Grade Level Taught	Kindergarten: 1 Cycle 1: 1 Cycle 2: 1 Cycle 3: 1 High School: 0 Resource/Special Education: 1	Kindergarten: 1 Cycle 1: 1 Cycle 2: 0 Cycle 3: 1 High School: 1 Resource/Special Education: 0	Kindergarten: 0 Cycle 1: 1 Cycle 2: 0 Cycle 3: 1 High School: 0 Resource/Special Education: 0

TABLE 3. Teacher participants in the sample, grouped by shared characteristics.

	Characteristics (n=8)
Age	Under 40: 5 Over 40: 3

Comfort with Technology	Low: 1 Medium: 5 High: 2
Language of Instruction	English: 2 French: 4 Hebrew: 2
Grade Level Taught	Kindergarten: 2 Cycle 1: 3 Cycle 2: 1 Cycle 3: 3 High School: 1 Resource: 1

To address the urgency of capturing this experience in real-time while adhering to the health and safety restrictions in place, each school group participated in a three-part group interview via Zoom. *Part one* encompassed an initial introduction to gather background on each teacher, to evoke their initial response to the shift, and to share the details of each school's unique plan for online distance learning. *Part two* had the purpose of discussing their transition mid-shift, several weeks in. So that we could experience their lived teaching realities first-hand, the teachers also accepted our participation in virtual teaching observations through the digital platform their school had chosen for online distance learning (live Zoom, live Google Meet, or post-class Zoom recordings). *Part three* mixed the school groups for the purpose of an end-of-year reflection and summary of experiences. Participants were divided into two groups based on availability and comfort with technology, purposefully mixing participants of different schools together. In this group interview, participants were invited to converse freely with each other in addition to responding to the prompts provided. In this way, our participants engaged in a research *community,* as defined by the Community of Inquiry framework. In this research, we will refer to this sort of community as a *group* to distinguish it from our use of the term "community" to define a sense of cultural belonging.

FINDINGS

Teachers' pedagogical decisions were tied to the uncertainty of the political landscape. It became customary for teachers to hear about educational

changes at the same time as the general public by tuning into daily news briefings by the Quebec government. In acknowledging inequities among families in Quebec, the government mandated that no schoolwork would be required during the pandemic. Jewish schools, among other private schools that made a transition to online learning, were permitted to continue but with the understanding that all work would be optional for students. Over the course of the 14-week online distance learning period, teachers experienced three definable shifts in their teaching regarding their specific pedagogical goals, which we present as three distinct "modes": survival, transition, and innovation.

Survival Mode

This initial phase, dubbed 'survival mode' by the teachers, encompassed the three-weeks of the initial transition to online learning from March to the Passover break. This period of time exemplified the tension between the theory of planning a shift to online distance learning and the reality of shifting without warning, amid a crisis. Survival mode was characterized by: 1) teachers prioritizing the socio-emotional well-being of students in crisis and 2) establishing basic expectations within the new platforms, while also 3) finding space for their own mental health needs. Approximately one week before the mandated school shut down on March 13, 2020, the Association of Jewish Day Schools began discussing options as sister schools abroad faced closure due to the spread of the virus. Servicing overlapping communities among the mainstream Jewish Day schools in Montreal appeared to produce similar plans among schools to use video conferencing tools. At no point was it discussed that the mainstream Jewish schools would temporarily stop instruction. This differed from Quebec's public schools, which experienced government-mandated closure. On Friday, March 13th, students were told to bring essential items home, while teachers and administration collaborated to envision new online learning schedules. The online distance model began on Monday for School A and Tuesday for schools B and C, giving teachers and administrators approximately 48 hours, including *Shabbat*[4], to redefine their teaching, learn the appropriate technological tools and determine how to explain it all to their young students. All eight teachers described feeling anxious during this time, but all noted a sense of support from their administration and/or co-teachers.

For the initial two-week closure, School A pursued asynchronous learning through Google Drive with a daily class Zoom meeting, while Schools B and C partially replicated their daily schedule through Google Meet. Bearing community responsibility, all three schools acted in such a way as

to ensure all families and teaching staff were suited with a functioning device. In some cases, administrative teams delivered school-property tablets and computers to families at home. Adhering to curricular or academic expectations was, for the most part, placed on the backburner, barring some specific cases where the pre-existing curriculum supported the socio-emotional well-being of students. The priority for the teachers was to plan for trauma-informed teaching[5]. All eight teachers acknowledged the students' high stress levels. They described the students' feelings of uncertainty; that "it was a scary time for them", according to one participant. Many teachers explained that their goal was to make their students as "comfortable" as possible. In lieu of academic material, teachers focused on replicating the classroom as a social space on the video conferencing platforms. Class time involved discussions, games and activities. During this phase, School A's schedule allotted one live Zoom class per day (amounting to approximately 1-2 classes per language per week) which was reserved exclusively for class bonding activities that would reduce students' feelings of social isolation.

Those with younger students, in Kindergarten and Cycle One, tended to focus on positive interactions, with limited negative moments of behaviour intervention. This reality was somewhat at odds with the second defining aspect of the survival mode phase: establishing classroom expectations. One teacher described how she attempted to balance trauma-informed teaching with clear classroom management in her Cycle One class, gently reminding her young, sensitive students that being on mute was not a punishment. She shared that she had had students in tears and felt it was because they did not initially understand her expectations. Contrastingly, teachers in Cycle 3 and high school noted the ease of platform transition for their students, who were significantly more independent from parents than their younger siblings. Teachers and schools had to make decisions about whether adhering to strict expectations was a benefit or detriment to students in a crisis. Additionally, teachers and schools had to determine what the expectations were in this new context, interpreting the core values of respect and *derech eretz*[6] as they appear on video conferencing platforms of Zoom and Google Meet, while planning for the privacy and digital safety of students. Teachers of older grade levels expressed that little needed to be done to assist students to become accustomed to video conferencing, however discussions surrounding respect were important. Teachers differed in their expectations regarding key elements of video conferencing: video on or off, chat on or off, self-mute on or off, eye contact or not, etc.

> Teacher B: So, I discuss with them that they have to behave nice, they have to sit properly, respectfully, not to chat, to say nice words. We have to go over rules because, otherwise, there's no respect between them. So that was the biggest challenge for me is those chat things that they're doing between them.
>
> Researcher: The chat on the side?
>
> Teacher B: Yes,'cause sometimes it's really not nice. So, I ask them not to do it and be respectful the way I am so please stop.
>
> Teacher A: Did you block the chatting? Like I…
>
> Teacher B: You know what? With today, all is blocked. I blocked it.
>
> Teacher C: My son in high school told me yesterday that fifty kids from other schools joined into his Zoom. At twenty minutes, the teacher had to stop the class.
>
> Researcher: Where did it come from? How did they get there?
>
> Teacher C: With the codes! Everybody gives to each other the Zoom's number and they're joining everybody's classes.
>
> Teacher B: Oh, my G-d! That's terrible.

The expectations were being repeatedly revised during this phase as teachers grappled with the removal of significant privacy barriers; they had virtual access to students' homes and students had access to theirs. Teachers expressed feelings of vulnerability, particularly because more than just their students were now privy to their teaching.

> Teacher H: We are exposing ourselves to parents and that is stressful…We changed our jobs completely, literally in two days…At the beginning, we were not sleeping, we were all stressed, barely eating, just chaos. And to hear any complaints, that I found humiliating because what else do you want us to do when there's chaos going on in the world?

The teachers were grappling with raw anxieties and focusing on reaching the end of this temporary shift, assuming that within weeks the crisis would be over and all would return to classes as normal. Many teachers were simultaneously burdened with responsibilities at home during the Covid crisis, including caretaking of family members or organizing their own children's homeschooling. School administrations recognized the toll this was taking on the teachers and stepped in to support them. Most teachers spoke of administrative support in the form of increasing their comfort with the new technology, alleviating some, but not all, of their vulnerability.

As teachers quickly grew in their comfort with technology, more elements of academic curriculum were being re-integrated into the online distance

learning. The Quebec government had mandated at this time that no new material should be assessed, informing the pedagogical goals of the secular subject teachers and discouraging the introduction of new material. For most of the eight teachers, their curriculum consisted mainly of reviewing material, with priority set on student comfort. The Judaic Studies teachers, however, were faced with the reality that Passover, a Jewish high holiday, was upon them, Covid-19 crisis or no crisis. The Judaic Studies curriculum cannot let any high holiday pass by without addressing it in the classroom, and thus these teachers implemented much of their Passover curriculum, which ended up having a positive impact on the students' emotional health at this time.

Transition to a New Routine

The second mode, 'transition to a new routine', was signaled by the Passover break, a two-week period allowing for rest and reflection on the part of teachers and administrators alike. Home and school being a two-way street, schools were under pressure from families to find sustainable schedule options as it became clear that the Covid-19 quarantine in Montreal would continue beyond Passover. In response, Schools A and C settled on a mostly synchronous model through Zoom, with a shortened school day followed by optional "office hours": scheduled time for students to join their teacher's Zoom with questions about the assigned work.

At this point, teachers had come to accept this new reality and began to plan for it, though still experiencing the ongoing anxiety of uncertainty. Families were putting pressure on school administrators to ensure schedules were academically robust but, at the same time, not overwhelming. Upon returning to digital classes after the Passover break, all three schools committed to modifications of their educational plans as the circumstances surrounding the pandemic's realities took on a more permanent feel.

The Quebec government's daily Covid-19 announcements were creating an environment of uncertainty, as their changing educational recommendations became increasingly confounding to teachers. At this time, public schools were now permitted to forward review-only learning material to students at home, with the recommendation that teachers send students the government-created website of digital teaching resources (Gouvernement du Quebec, 2020). No new learning was prescribed, and all exams were cancelled. However, there was no government-led commitment to a timeline for return to in-person learning. In the meantime, teachers within the Jewish private system had been steps ahead

of the government's learning plan. Due to community resources, they had already spent one month reviewing material and successfully introducing video conferencing and educational technology platforms to students. Teachers expressed pride in their accomplishments in contrast to the public system, which was subject to government limitations, trying to achieve a balanced position between the reality of their community resources and the expectations of the government and teaching unions. And thus, this phase was defined by pedagogical uncertainty; teachers focused on increasing student engagement while cautiously moving forward in curriculum. Teachers were becoming more comfortable with technology, but they expressed significant fears of the class not being "as good as normal". Though participants explained that they felt pressure from families, several teacher participants identified themselves as the largest source of pressure.

In terms of expectations, each school had settled into their own standards. School A's teachers were mostly satisfied with the administration's attempts to send mass communication to parents regarding behavioural expectations. School B had arranged for administrators to sit in on classes to aid teachers with classroom management issues, a problem arising from the limits of screen sharing using Google Meet. School C mandated all teachers to record their lessons and post them for absent students. Teacher H explained that this was also a strategy to enforce behavioural expectations.

As already indicated, older students had a higher level of comfort with technology. During this second phase, there were nevertheless gradual improvements for elementary students. Teacher A explained that her Grade One students could use interactive whiteboards to show Math thinking. Her instructional time usually involved supporting students through technical difficulties as their digital competency progressed slowly. Teachers began sharing with one another about new technologies they were trying. As the positive messaging and support from some parents increased, teachers' experimentation with digital teaching also increased. By the end of this phase, we began witnessing a birth in pedagogical innovation as teachers' comfort with technology grew and a sense of community support was felt. However, attempts at innovation in a time of inconsistent government protocols brought with it an inflation of planning time as teachers had to think through new and changing obstacles.

Innovation Mode

The third mode, "innovation mode" as described by Teacher F, coincided with the Quebec government mandate on May 14, 2020 that schools on the island of Montreal would remain closed for the duration of the school year. Anxiety appeared to lessen as the teachers committed to a single plan for the duration of the year (approximately five weeks), developing routines with which they felt most comfortable. Teacher C noted that her planning time began to decrease because she finally 'knew where [she was] heading'. After experiencing some successes, teachers were growing in their hopes to limit the learning gaps as much as possible. As Teacher G expressed, they may have had fewer class hours but they no longer had to spend time getting students dressed and undressed for recess. Several teachers also voiced that their students, of necessity, had developed many executive function skills that promoted efficiency of learning.

Like the previous phase, teachers listed their own expectations as the greatest source of pressure. And yet, they had deep levels of empathy for their own limitations, the difficulties facing their students' families, and the challenges for children in sustaining their motivation. As the summer weather began, tensions appeared, while focus on academic achievement nevertheless climbed. Younger students, who were continuing to receive support from families, were more successful in sustaining attention and upholding attendance records, but teachers encountered limitations in achieving curriculum standards. Teacher C, a kindergarten teacher, lamented that her curriculum had become entirely social-emotional in scope, even as it was 'impossible to do peer-to-peer interaction on Zoom'. Teacher A expressed difficulty in differentiating her reading support to an entire class despite attempting to translate learning centers into the Zoom platform. Contrastingly, teachers in the older grades, who initially experienced an easier transition to digital learning with their students, now faced the greatest challenges to success: absenteeism. They felt that the government's removal of assessment expectations was the largest factor in reduced engagement for their students and their parents, as assessment played a significant role in ensuring their children's presence in the online classrooms. Teacher D, a Cycle 3 teacher, noted that her greatest challenge was in determining how to replace the gaps in her curriculum that were formerly filled with government-mandated exams. Struggling against a lack of student accountability combined with enticingly warm weather, a treat to be thoroughly enjoyed after living through a Montreal winter—and a Covid winter at that, these teachers expressed pedagogical innovation in making learning fun so that students would *choose* to attend

their suddenly optional classes. All teachers in Cycle 3 and high school felt that those students who did attend class achieved the full curriculum.

DISCUSSION

Though Internet connectivity was a consistent nuisance to teachers, their main concern was their connectivity with and among their students. In this study, the learning groups had, in all but one case, been learning together physically in the classroom for nearly seven months. To what extent was this classroom connectivity sustained during this Covid-19 online shift? The dynamics of connectivity (as envisioned by teachers) can be described as follows: (1) peer-to-peer connectivity: the social connections students display towards each other, for instance through a classroom culture, (2) student-teacher connectivity: how close or distant teachers felt in relation to their students, which can be shown through student contact, presence and engagement, and (3) Jewish identity connectivity: how teachers felt students were maintaining connections to the Jewish traditions and values as promoted by each school's religious and community profiles. The changing levels of connectivity impacted teachers' emotional experiences and pedagogical choices. They leaned on the video conferencing platforms of Zoom and Google Meet, in addition to email, social media and educational technologies, to promote these connections, often with frustrating limits.

Peer-to-Peer Connectivity

In the initial shift, teachers prioritized the creation of social spaces when using Zoom and Google Meet. The extent to which students were able to engage with the planned activities as a social experience varied greatly by the age of the students. Younger students, those in Kindergarten and Cycle 1, did not appear to orient themselves to their peers online and very rarely engaged their peers in conversation. When they acknowledged something about their peers, such as moments they witnessed in their peer's video feed, they directed their comment instead to the teacher. Despite the curriculum for this age level promoting high amounts of social engagement, Teacher B stated it was "impossible to do peer-to-peer interaction on Zoom." Younger students were often preoccupied by the phenomenon of seeing themselves mirrored on the screen and would frequently make silly faces or noises, unaware of the larger audience. When they logged on, they were most excited to share news and ideas directly with the teacher.

The older students, in Cycle 2 and up, were more oriented to each other through structured group activities. When teachers directed discussions or

competitions, these students displayed an awareness of the ideas and performance of their peers. According to the teachers, this mirrored their normal interaction in the physical classroom. These students were also much more likely to unmute and speak directly to another student on the video platform than their younger counterparts, however the interaction was much more likely to happen if directed by the teacher.

The "trickling in" of students to the video conference classroom did not necessarily foster an environment for natural peer conversation, though.

> Teacher B: We're supposed to give them at least the first five minutes, ten minutes to do chat with each other, to see how they're doing and then start the class. But not all the time it's happening 'cause some kids come in very late and you can't wait, how long are you going to wait? You have to start the learning so that's the biggest… so all I do is I do it at the beginning of class and at the end of class because I have to see everybody.

As age increased, students relied more on social media to communicate with each other. Cycle 2 students would use the chat embedded in Zoom and Meet. In some instances, the embedded chat encouraged negative peer interactions and was therefore blocked by the teacher, allowing only teacher-directed chat functions. Teachers explained that their oldest students would mostly use their own student-created groups on social media platforms to chat or communicate with each other. Teacher F, a high school teacher, leaned into the use of social media. At the onset of the quarantine, she made a class WhatsApp group to discuss questions, thoughts and emotions. Though she had thought the students would be reticent to communicate with her in the group, she found it was not a problem for them and that many students engaged with this chat group to form social connections. The students who relied most on teacher interaction during Zoom class appeared to teachers as the students most likely to be left out of those peer groups, and elementary teachers expressed frustration that they could not remedy the situation from a distance.

Overall, when asked, many teachers felt that there was not a strong sense of classroom connection during this time.

Student-Teacher Connectivity

Teachers' attempts at connecting with their students relied heavily on their previously established relationships. Attendance and engagement during lessons was their best way to determine the strength of this connection from a distance. Though teachers shared moments of emailing, calling or socially-distant-visiting students who were not logging onto the live classes, they did not feel that these represented as strong a connectivity as

meaningful moments during the live online classes. This form of connectivity can also be understood through differences in student age level. For younger students, teachers relied on parental involvement, which ensured higher attendance levels, but it also meant most out-of-class communication was parent-initiated or parent-focused. Additionally, teachers admitted that they tended to communicate more with parents with whom they had a strong previously-established relationship. Teachers for the older grades relied less on parent support due to the higher independence of the students. They were more likely to email or contact the students directly, but there were also higher levels of absenteeism in the older grades as time passed and accountability for grades was removed.

During the live classes, students' use of body language could be a challenge for student-teacher connectivity. With a limited view of the student, it was difficult for both the teacher and ourselves as researchers to tell who was actually engaged with the lesson. In this learning environment, eye contact is not always an indicator of attention, particularly if students are using multiple screens or devices. Students, particularly in the older grades, were more likely to turn off their video feed. Additionally, the mute function, though limiting distractions, created a sense of isolation for teachers when they were reading a book or screen sharing. All teachers used the one-to-one Socratic method throughout their lessons to check-in on student engagement. This resulted in temporary increases in engagement, but less so for older grades due to lack of accountability. For the younger grades, accountability appeared to take a stronger form in disappointment-avoidance and wanting to please their teacher. Unfortunately, though, by going one at a time through class sizes of over 20, teachers frequently did not catch off-task behaviours in a timely fashion. The adjustment to inferring from new forms of body language was initially very jarring for teachers, but by the end of the school year they felt that having all students visible on screen was potentially an improvement to live classroom teaching. Small-group teaching, such as the Resource classes in School A or the office hours scheduled in Schools A and C, appeared to foster high levels of student-teacher connectivity.

Teachers' largest frustration was in differentiating instruction. It was challenging to reach students who were struggling or had a lack of tools at home. It was also frustrating for teachers to know that advanced students were bored, but teachers did not feel empowered to make significant changes to engage them.

> Teacher C: You know your students, you know who needs extra attention. In a classroom setting, I can be there to support in an instant, but through a screen, it can take half a class to realize she's not with me.

However, there were certain students who displayed an increase in connectivity during online teaching. Teachers noted students who surprised them: students with learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties or anxiety. Many of these students participated more than usual. According to the teachers, they felt it was due to an increased sense of comfort and reduction of distractions from being in their own space. Teacher A, the resource teacher, felt that the reduction of workload and increased clarity provided by a clear and condensed learning schedule promoted the success of the students.

As time passed, and connectivity was less consistent than in the traditional, in-person classroom, seven teachers experienced disappointment and sadness. Absenteeism was the biggest cause of these feelings, but it was also due to their constant comparison to the way things were before the pandemic. Teacher G, however, did not display this same disappointment. Her case was quite unique as she was unable to rely on previously established relationships with the students because she had taken over a parental leave position just three weeks prior to the quarantine. Having nothing to compare to or base her class culture on, she was forced to establish connectivity with her students over Zoom. She felt she was able to establish a "family" online by opening herself up to her students, including inviting her own children to the live classes and reaching the personal interests of her students. She felt pressure to perform, and quickly. Despite their shorter time together, her students were clearly engaged and showed connectivity with her during our observations.

Jewish Identity Connectivity

Each of the Montreal Jewish Day schools has a mission to foster the Jewish identity of their students, and each successfully balances that safe space for Judaism within the context of contemporary Quebec (Hirsch, 2019). The transition to online distance learning threatened to disperse that safe space into the home space. Though parents choose to send their children to a school that reflects their religious and linguistic associations, their home practice, though, does not always adhere to the school's expectations. Despite this seeming challenge, Jewish identity was used as an emotional support strategy to unite physically distant children through uncertain times. Such connectivity to Judaism was not always driven by the teachers. During the first phase of the shift, Judaic Studies teachers recognized that the Passover curriculum brought comfort to the students, but also that it

was their duty to ensure students were prepared to meet religious expectations during the holiday. Model Seders[7] and group activities brought students together to share in these identity-supporting virtual moments. To support a shared Zionist framework, Schools A and C relied on volunteers from Israel that the students were familiar with from the school year. These young adults would Zoom in from Israel to play games and lead activities with the students.

Initially, expectations for behaviour and dress had to be explicitly decided upon by each school based on their religious frameworks. This was meant to ensure that the video conference platforms would serve as Jewish spaces. Some teachers vocalized that they "let go" of asking their male students to wear *kippahs* and felt less responsible for specific religious traditions with the students at a distance, symptomatic of the teachers' struggles for connectivity with their students. Usually, a consistent space for morning prayers is critical to the schools' religious identities (Hirsch, 2019).However, during the shift to online learning, this responsibility was transferred to the parents. For their part, secular teachers did not feel that they acted to develop Jewish content, which was in line with their usual teaching practice. Instead, their focus was on social connectivity, a defining characteristic of monoethnic communities. Bringing students who "grew up together" into shared digital social spaces acted as a reminder of community. Schools supported this community-oriented focus with virtual assemblies and school-wide events marking important days in the Jewish calendar.

Previously private activities were thrust into the social space to ensure students felt a continued connection to their school, and thus, their Jewish identity. School C collaborated with families to organize an offline Car Parade to celebrate a holiday, while School A created a social media competition to encourage students to submit videos of their morning prayers. One participant expressed that supporting their students' identities during a crisis brought them "strength and happiness". By using a combination of offline and online strategies, including social media and shared digital spaces, students' sense of community-belonging and respect for the Jewish calendar endured the shift to online distance learning, which worked to maintain a general sense of Jewish connectivity.

CONCLUSION

By following eight Montreal Jewish Day School teachers in real time throughout their experiences during the Covid-19 quarantine and its impact on schooling, this study has sought to describe the uniqueness of

the transition to online distance learning during a time of crisis[8]. Throughout the experience, teachers recounted high levels of anxiety, frustration and disappointment. And yet, they also communicated a feeling of support from their school administrations and a sense of pride in their accomplishments. The support and sense of mutual pride likely stem from the unique community model of the schools. The school community exists within the larger pluralistic Jewish community of Montreal, which itself held shared, unifying goals in this time of crisis. Teachers felt part of this community network that was trying to survive a common obstacle. An acknowledgement of the limitations placed upon teachers and families created an internalized contradiction in teachers: of both frustration and empathy.

Teachers were asked to make the transition to online distance learning with minimal training and consistently adapted their programming to the ever-changing mandates of the government. Through each mode of the shift (we examined three phases in this article), teachers integrated pedagogical choices that prioritized students' social needs to sustain their sense of belonging within their Jewish community and adapt that feeling to this new platform. These attempts left teachers feeling less than satisfied with the level of connectivity to and among peers. The transition to online classrooms was not a natural experience for teachers and students, particularly those in Kindergarten and Cycle One. Additionally, teachers faced frustration and confusion in addressing the conceptual aspects of their online learning communities. Only with the creation of a firm timeline for the duration of online distance learning did teachers truly start to feel as if they could give themselves permission to plan. While managing real anxiety, then, teachers nevertheless managed to partially translate their curriculum to online spheres and support the emotional well-being of their students.

Throughout the shift, the connection to shared Jewish values was mostly sustained and relied upon to foster community during a difficult transition, but this was achieved mostly at the school level, less directed by teachers themselves. Our findings build on prior research (Hirsch, 2016; Hirsch, 2019; Hirsch et al., 2020) confirming that Montreal Jewish Day schools sustain a sense of Jewish community belonging through the creation of Jewish environments, along social, conceptual and pedagogical axes. The method of sustaining community through establishing a Jewish environment was reinterpreted for online learning environments during the Covid-19 shift. Prior to the shift, the community network between Jewish Day Schools functioned to sustain a shared Montreal Jewish community, defined pluralistically. During distance-learning, when the

physical unity of school groups dissolved, the overarching sense of community belonging was nevertheless retained as a common goal.

NOTES

1. Describing families as shomer shabbat means they are observant of the Jewish Sabbath and keep a Kosher diet, which restricts the meals they can eat (for example, they do not eat pork) or the way they are prepared (mainly separating dairy and meat).
2. The *Sephardic tradition* refers to Jewish religious and cultural practices rooted in the historical communities of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and their descendants, particularly those from North Africa and the Middle East.
3. Kabbalat Shabbat is the ensemble of rituals that celebrate the welcoming of the Sabbath, starting on Friday afternoon, before nightfall. Jewish primary day schools all have a specific activity to mark this: teachers may read a story to the students, sing with them the traditional songs, light candles, etc.
4. Although not all teachers in the Jewish day schools are practicing Judaism, some do. For those who are 'Shomer Shabbat', i.e., who respect the strict rules of the Sabbath, this means they do not drive, work, or use electricity from Friday eve to Saturday eve.
5. Trauma-informed teaching is based on the neurological reality that children cannot learn if they do not feel safe or cared for in their school environment (Aupperle et al., 2012). It is defined as a collection of strategies that respond to students' sense of stress, safety, and care (Minahan, 2019).
6. Derech eretz is defined as "the ways of the land", meaning the way one acts in the wider world. It is used here to refer to a desired mode of behaviour that is respectful of others and of things.
7. The Seder is the traditional Passover meal, during which family members and guests read together from the *Haggadah* which tells the story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. Singing and other activities are a part of the celebration. A model Seder in this context is an educational activity in which students act out a Seder with their peers.
8. This study only reflects a portion of the collected data. Further understanding of the shift to online distance learning and its impact on community can be obtained by analyzing the perspectives of parents and students, and by comparing their reactions to the transitions with the teachers' experiences.

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