

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Journey to Poland of People with Intellectual Disability  
Disorder- "Hashahar" Delegation**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's  
Degree in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2017

## Abstract

This study explores the traditional Israeli journey to Poland as experienced by adults with intellectual disability disorders. The purpose of the present study is to analyze and examine the journey to Poland taken by intellectually disabled individuals. The following research questions were considered:

1. In what manner do adults with from intellectual disability disorders experience and interpret the journey to the concentration and death camps, from their own perspectives as well as that of the researcher who had accompanied the journey as an observer;
2. In what manner, if any, did adults with from intellectual disability disorders travelling to Poland realize the educational goals determined by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Affairs.

Over the past several decades, Holocaust studies have become an integral part of the educational curriculum in several countries worldwide (Bastel, Matzka & Miklas, 2010; Gundare & Batelaan, 2003; Mailes & Cowan, 2012; Spalding, Savage & Garcia, 2007; Utgaard, 2003). In Israel, Youth journeys to Poland are a common and well-known phenomenon, considered one of the key events of the Israeli education system (Podoshen, Hunt & Andrzejewski, 2015), evoking a discourse of supporters and opponents alike. Per Gross, the Holocaust is a primary factor in the Jewish identity of youths in Israel (Gross, 2010a). To that end, the journey to Poland is still a relatively new and unfamiliar phenomenon among persons with from intellectual disability disorders. Persons with from IDD<sup>1</sup> have long been absent from national-social Holocaust discourse. The phenomenon of conducting such journeys for the IDD population has developed on fertile soil of change in perceptions and stances toward IDD individuals in Israel and worldwide, including change in treatment policies (Salvador-Carulla & Bertelli, 2008; Schalock, Luckasson & Shogren, 2007). In 2012, Israel adopted the UN

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<sup>1</sup> IDD – Intellectual Disability Disorder

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, promoting equal opportunity rights and actively working to make all areas of life more accessible. These include, among others, accessibility to museums, memorial sites and other sites of national-cultural significance.

While journeys to Poland have been researched in regards to typically developed individuals (Lev, 1998, 2007; Davidovich & Suan, 2011), they have not been explored in regards to the IDD population. This study aims to shed light on the phenomenon and examine the manner in which IDD individuals experience the journey to Poland.

### **Research Method**

The research method chosen for this study is the qualitative paradigm, following a strategy of multiple case studies (Stake, 1995). This approach allows for a complex, holistic examination and findings analysis, achieving a detailed, in-depth and all-inclusive depiction of processes and subjective interpretations given by the sampled individuals. The chosen case study is the August 2015 "Hashachar 6" delegation to Poland. The sampled cases are comprised of 21 participants – adults with from IDD (mild impairment). The researcher acted as observer throughout the entire process, from group building and journey preparation, to the journey itself. The researcher held the role of delegation leader, performed observations, journaled the journey, documented evening group discussions at each stage of the journey, and interviewed the participants upon their return to Israel. Analysis of the material collected in the current study follows Gross (1995). Phrases were used as analysis units, and repeating themes and patterns were searched for in an attempt to recognize categories and inter-category relationships (Gross, 1995, 2002). Several procedures were performed during the data analysis phase (journal, evening talk documentation, interviews). First, primary categories were identified (ETIC) based on prior theories; data were openly sorted and analyzed accordingly (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1997). At the second stage, an inductive process of new category identification was performed (EMIC). Sources were read several times over, for an in-depth understanding and primary analysis following open-coding

approach. First, we identified words and meanings in the phrases, and then examined the interactions of their meanings within the text, in order to create temporary initial categories (Kassan & Krumer-Nevo, 2010). Next, we performed a mapped analysis, examining the relations within the categories and between categories and subcategories, identifying and binding relationships in order to create hierarchy between categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Finally, we identified a super-category, which influenced and fed the other categories. It is presented in the theoretical model, which binds the professional literature and well-known, relevant theories pertaining to the current study.

Following the analysis, eight categories were defined. Of these, one was chosen as the main category, defined as "authentic, empowering, unmediated and multi-sensory learning". We found relationships leading to the rest of the categories: "sensations and feelings", "knowledge acquisition", "personal strengths and various difficulties", "use of defense mechanisms and need for assistance and support", "relationships and belonging", "the journey as a formative experience" and "personal change".

## **Main Findings and Discussion**

The findings correspond with those of other studies performed on a normative student population, which point to a significance of the journeys to Poland for the non-disabled population (Davidovich & Kendell, 2006; Davidovich & Suan, 2011; Yaakobi & Zilberberg, 2008; Lev, 2007; Bacon & Kimball, 1989;; Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995 Chan,2012 Cross, 2002 Ewert, 1989 ; ;Cowan & Maitles, 2007 Gross, 2010a; Jacobs, 2014; Pfeiffer & Jones, 1983; Reid, 2002; Romi & Lev, 2007):

- a. Regarding the question of the manner in which participants experience and interpret the journey to the concentration and death camps, from their own perspective as well as that of the researcher acting as "participating observer" – it was found that IDD individuals experience the journey to Poland as a significant learning experience, as presented both cognitively and emotionally. The interactive group

journey in which they participated has promoted their learning of the Holocaust and became a means for reassuring their identity and sense of belonging.

It was found that persons of IDD who had taken this journey were able to identify with the Jewish people and forge a sense a belonging to the land of Israel, the State of Israel, and their ancestry. In this regard, they are no different than normative adolescents. As Davidovich and Suan (2011) point out, the vast majority of studies concerning stance and identity following the journey reveal that the experience acts as a device for validation and reaffirmation of the Jewish-Israeli identity, of Zionist and national values, and of Jewish belonging (Gross, 2000; Romi & Lev, 2003; Davidovich & Kendell, 2006; Davidovich & Suan, 2011; Podoshen, Hunt & Andrzejewski, 2015).

- b. Regarding the question of whether and how persons of IDD who had ventured on the journey to Poland realize the educational goals determined by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Affairs, it was found that they were indeed able to do so, in the following manner:
  1. Sampled participants had acquired knowledge, expressed interest and identified with Jewish life in Europe before and during the Holocaust. These manifested, among others, in question asking, comments throughout the journey, and in the interviews conducted shortly after their return to Israel.
  2. It was found that knowledge acquisition and the emotional experience had come together, enabling participants to identify with the Jewish people and values. This manifested in talk of belonging to the Jewish people and a bond to Jewish symbols.
  3. Participants were exposed to contents of Zionist education, humanity and human rights, expressed via active participation in ceremonies and attachment to national symbols such as flag waving and singing of the Tikva, the national anthem.
  4. Hands-on, multi-sensory learning was expressed via visual, audiological, kinesthetic and olfactory means:

- **Visual** – learning through observation seems to have been highly significant and stimulated participants' imagination. It produced responses of new insights and internalization of their knowledge of the Holocaust.
- **Auditory** – it was found that listening and attentiveness were associated with the visual channel and helped the participants learn, comprehend, and internalize their experience, reinforcing their knowledge of the Holocaust.
- **Kinesthetic** – It was found that through physical and unmediated touch, participants experienced sensations of shock, which they had expressed emotionally, verbally, throughout the journey and in their post-journey reports.
- **Olfactory** – the unique smells of the camps had formed associations in the minds of the participants—death, gas and smoke—thereby enabling them to emotionally connect with the difficult experience.

These findings fit the argument presented by Maitles (2011), that a visit to the camps can provide visitors with a greater understanding of the magnitude of the tragedy and cruelty that happened there, and aids the learning and understanding process.

These findings correspond with studies claiming that attending the actual place where the events occurred, detachment from daily life and a focus on a solitary topic, pushing all other matters aside, as well as an incorporation of the emotional aspect, allow for maximal learning conditions (Lev, 2010). It is an authentic experience that enables multisensory learning, corresponding with the entire being of the student. Many researchers report this form of learning to be helpful in knowledge provision, via an emotional experience, and may also lead behavioral and social change. Furthermore, the personal experience forms a foundation for learning among normative populations, and even more so among the special needs community (Bacon & Kimball, 1989; Berman &

Davis-Berman, 1995; Chan, 2012; Cross, 2002; Ewert, 1989; Reid, 2002; Yaakobi & Zilberberg, 2008).

To conclude, it appears that the participants in the current study, IDD individuals of mild impairment, were found fit to participate in the journeys to the concentration camps in Poland, revealed to be a significant learning experience for them as much as it is for the general population. Nevertheless, and despite high correlation between prior studies of unimpaired populations and the population of the current study, we had found several unique characteristics exhibited by IDD individuals under the circumstances of the journey. These include high levels of fear, intensity of seasickness, and an increased need for external support; all of these will be elaborated upon later. Several parameters should therefore be taken into account for specific future reference regarding delegations to Poland of persons with IDD, as detailed in the recommendations below.

## **Conclusions**

The primary conclusion arising from this study is that, given the role of the Holocaust in the Israeli national consensus, and given that persons of IDD have the right to equal opportunities in all area of life, a journey to Poland of individuals with IDD may provide an opportunity for learning about the Holocaust, identifying with the Jewish people, attain a sense of belonging to the people of Israel, the State of Israel, and their ancestry.

## **Recommendations**

Alongside the benefits and successes of the journey, as revealed in the current study, the journey itself is complex and involves physical and emotional challenges that hold the potential for negative repercussions (injury, post-traumatic stress reactions). It is thus recommended that:

- Attention should be given to therapeutic treatment of participants following their return, and professional care for those in need of it.

- Attention should be given to improving and adapting the physical conditions of the journey, to fit the needs of individuals with IDD.

Considering the pioneering nature of this study, the results should be scrutinized. Additional research designs should be developed, in order to deepen the understanding of this issue, particularly follow-up studies that further examine the implications of the journey for a bigger sample. These should be conducted using further research methods such as quantitative study, population comparison, and an observational study examining the effects of the journey over time.