This thesis seeks to gain insight into Jewish high school students’ experiences in a small rural community. Specifically, it aims to explore their experiences with personal identities as Jewish people. I was particularly interested in investigating what they encounter in a high school setting in relationship to anti-Semitism. I was also interested in how they navigate their way as a minority ethnicity in a rural California community.

Using a qualitative research approach, participants’ perceptions were gathered through a mixed methods survey. Volunteer participants answered a survey consisting primarily of open-ended questions pertaining to their experiences and observations of hateful language or anti-Semitism at their schools, as well as the people to they felt comfortable going when or if they encountered anti-Semitism or hateful actions or language. Themes of identity, prejudice, and pride emerged as the data were analyzed and coded. Notably, many of the students’ surveyed experienced anti-Semitism at their school. The same amount witnessed others using derogatory language towards students of color or other religions. Students surveyed did not feel comfortable going to an adult for assistance. Conclusions, limitations of the study, and implications for future research are explored in the final chapter.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my family for instilling me with a rich cultural history and values of an ancient culture that I hold very dear. They have always supported all my pursuits, and I am very lucky to have you all. I would like to thank my Aunt Lili, a Holocaust survivor whose story has inspired me to begin to tell others’ stories as well.

I would also like to thank my thesis advisor and major professor Dr. Ann Diver-Stamnes for being a constant source of support during this long process. Ann spent hours discussing, reading, and helping me complete this thesis. I could not have done it without her.

I have much gratitude for all my teachers and professors with whom I have worked at Humboldt State while working in the Master’s program. They taught me the value of research and how much teachers can add to the world of academia.

I would like to thank my coworkers at Trillium Charter School who have been a constant source of support over the last four years of this program. I would not have been able to complete this program without their flexibility. I am proud to work at a school that values community and is like my second family.

Last but not least, I have to thank my daughter Shoshana who has been very patient through this long process. Shoshana’s personal experiences at school inspired this study. Shosh had to make many dinners for herself, but I hope she is inspired to
always pursue her dreams, no matter how difficult they seem. Thanks for being a wonderful daughter and a great friend.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................... 4

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................... 31

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .......................................................................................................... 38

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS ........................................................................................................ 48

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .................................................................................................. 54

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................................... 57

APPENDIX A: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE ....................................................................... 66
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Martin Niemöller

Jewish identity has been defined as engagement in a set of value struggles between traditional and modern values. This study attempts to explore how adolescents engage in struggles with their Jewish and American identities. Their school experiences influence much of their lives and the ways in which they define themselves within that setting. An in-depth look at these adolescents’ experiences with anti-Semitism could further an understanding of how they form their ethnic identities, and how they perceive themselves in relation to other adolescents. Both theory and research emphasize the benefits of strong ethnic and religious identities, as well as the importance of cultural and community ties (Erikson, 1968). A sense of
one’s place in a community and in history is crucial to a healthy identity (Erikson, 1968).

In exploring the complexity of Jewish identity, little is known about the interplay of the religious and cultural aspects of identity and the ways in which they contribute to individuals’ inner experiences (Friedman, Friedlander & Blustein, 2005). Adolescents are in the unique position of existing between the worlds of adulthood and childhood (Maier, 1969). They are in the process of taking what they have learned and observed in childhood and either accepting or rejecting that information as they go about forming their own unique identity (Maier, 1969).

Education is an important aspect of the Jewish culture and religion. Jewish youth have a particular dilemma. They are two generations removed from World War II and the Holocaust, perhaps the most difficult era in the history of the Jewish people. Young American Jews live in a society overfilled with material goods and devoid of the overt anti-Semitism that shaped their grandparents’ lives (Kadushin, Kelner, Saxe, & Brodsky, 2000). The ways these young Jews define their Jewish identity gives us a glimpse into the future of the Jewish people. They also speak volumes about the future of our society and the place for spirituality in a sea of materialism (Kadushin et al., 2000).

Adolescence can be difficult, and school can be a challenge for many teenagers. Jewish students have their own experiences that are unique. This thesis explores the experiences of ten Jewish adolescents in rural northern California high schools.
The remaining chapters of this thesis will be organized as follows. Chapter Two, the literature review, will give an overview of the published research on the Holocaust, Holocaust education, adolescent identity development theories, and ethnic identity formation. The research question seeks to understand the experiences students have in a rural community regarding their religion and ethnic identities.

Chapter Three will provide an overview of the methodology by which the research was conducted, including a description of the participants, an explanation of the questionnaire and interviews, and an explanation of the ways in which the data were coded and analyzed.

Chapter Four, Results, reports the quantitative and qualitative results of the mixed method questionnaires that were completed for this study. Excerpts from the survey are included, and the students’ experiences are told in their own words.

Chapter Five offers an analysis of the results of the questionnaire and the interviews. Finally, Chapter Six highlights the limitations of the research and offers conclusions and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The Holocaust, the genocide of European Jews and other under-represented populations in the mid-twentieth century, is one of the most horrific crimes of modern history. Historians have spent much time analyzing the causes, nature, and consequences of this horrendous event that has many lessons to teach about humanity, human resolve, and the results of hatred. Remembrance and correct representation of the topic are important to our global community’s students and schools (Totten, 1999a). This literature review addresses the Holocaust and genocide history, educational practices in our school systems as well as the ways these events relate to adolescent development, and Jewish students’ identity development and experiences in school. Holocaust programs and curricula will be analytically explored as well. Much of Holocaust education is geared toward teaching the subject matter under the guise of tolerance or anti-bias education as opposed to as an historical event. Many young people learn about the Holocaust from history books or popular mainstream movies. This literature review will examine the complex and sensitive issues that currently influence Holocaust curriculum and education and the ways in which these issues affect students’ school experiences.
History of Holocaust

The Holocaust was not the first mass genocide of an entire people, nor was it the last (Sullivan, 2002). Mass exterminations of people happened prior to World War II, such as the genocide of indigenous peoples committed by the United States government and the millions of Africans who perished as a result of slavery (Sullivan, 2002). The lessons of the Holocaust have not been learned, as today genocides still continue, such as ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, as well as the ethnic factions who are massacring one another in Rwanda (Sullivan, 2002).

Raphael Lemkin originally coined the word genocide in 1943 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Singer, 2003). The United Nations adopted the following definition of genocide:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group such as: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations, 1948).

One of the pivotal events of the 20th century and in human history was the European Holocaust of the 1940s (Sullivan, 2002). The Holocaust refers to the Nazi program of systematic persecution, ghettoization, incarceration in concentration camps, and attempted annihilation of European Jews (Parson & Totten, 1994;
Within a three-year time period, six million Jews were exterminated (Sullivan, 2002). Members of other populations including Roma people, homosexuals, individuals with mental and physical disabilities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Communists also suffered persecution, imprisonment, and death during these times (Jokiniemi & Lauckner, 2000). Approximately 13 million women, men, and children died at the hands of the Nazis (Fox, 1997). Early discriminatory actions against Jews began with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 (Fox, 1997). Jews were stripped of German citizenship, businesses taken away, and schools closed leading to Kristallnacht in 1938, during which Jewish businesses and synagogues were burned, 100 Jews were killed, and thousands were beaten and tortured (Fox, 1997; Novick, 1999). Nuremburg and Kristallnacht are two examples of legalized discrimination (Fox, 1997; Novick, 1999). One of the many reasons the Holocaust occurred was that people in authority legitimized discrimination (Donnelly, 2006). These events were widely reported in the U.S. press and repeatedly denounced at all levels of American society (Novick, 1999). Americans were well aware of Nazi anti-Semitism from the regime’s beginnings in 1933 (Novick, 1999). It would be another four years before the fate of the European Jews became known in the West (Novick, 1999). It has been stated that when the full story of the ongoing Holocaust reached the West in 1942, it was disbelieved due to the magnitude of the Nazis’ plan (Novick, 1999).

Many Holocaust survivors have dedicated their lives to telling the world their stories (Sullivan, 2002). More has been written about the Holocaust than any other
genocide in history (Sullivan, 2002). The magnitude of the Holocaust is one of the factors that caused this particular genocide to attain such prominence in twentieth century history (Sullivan, 2002). The Nazis were also efficient record keepers, resulting in detailed information and documentary evidence of the atrocities committed (Sullivan, 2002).

Remembering and commemorating the Holocaust in the United States did not emerge immediately after the concentration camps were liberated in 1945 (Holocaust Center of Northern California, 2003). In spite of the media’s reporting of World War II, decades passed before the Holocaust and its atrocities entered into the American public’s awareness (HCONC, 2003). Holocaust consciousness inspired the creation of numerous Holocaust memorials, museums, and education centers across the U.S. (HCONC, 2003).

Discussion of the Holocaust leads not only to the questions of how and why this event occurred but how its legacy can raise international awareness of human rights abuses and genocide (Donnelly, 2006). Interest in remembering the Holocaust has also led to an interest in studying and teaching about this historical event (Totten, 1999a). Although there is a substantial amount of literature on the United States’ relationship with the Holocaust, there are only a few studies that explore the history of the Holocaust in U.S. culture (Fallace, 2004).

In summary, the Holocaust was one of the most horrific episodes in modern history. The senseless murders of 6 million Jews and millions of other under-represented populations have left the world with much upon which to reflect. The
social and historical context of these events must be closely examined and carefully interpreted if we are to accurately and successfully educate our youth.

*Uniqueness vs. Universality of the Holocaust*

Is the Holocaust a universal event that can be taught in a broad historical context, or is it a unique event without comparison and lessons (Rosenbaum, 2001)? The uniqueness of the Holocaust has been at the center of the debate about how to represent the event in popular culture and in memorial (Fallace, 2004). Holocaust historians have been divided into two different philosophical ideas: those who claim that the Holocaust was only about Jews and Jewish history, and those who believe the Holocaust involved more than Jewish people and assert that the lessons have universal appeal and implications (Riley, 1996). The issue of defining the Holocaust as either a unique or universal event in history becomes especially important in regard to Holocaust education (Mintz, 2001). The Holocaust was unique amongst modern genocides, as one third of the Jewish people were murdered for no political, economic, or military reason (Bauer, 2001). This notion warrants further explorations as to the validity of the view that the Holocaust was unique among genocides. The importance of this argument is the basis for constructing an understanding of how we view the Holocaust and genocides in our culture (Rosenbaum, 2001). For this reason, whether or not the Holocaust was a unique genocide is a subject of ongoing debate among scholars and educators (Rosenbaum, 2001).
This dispute as to the uniqueness of the Holocaust has led researchers to formulate precise definitions of genocide and mass murder (Ben-Bassat, 2000). The main question as to whether the Holocaust was unique is whether the persecution of Jews was different from other genocides (Ben-Bassat, 2000; Berenbaum & Roth, 1989; Rosenbaum, 2001). In short, this debate considers whether the Holocaust is an event outside of history, beyond human comprehension. If the Holocaust is seen outside of the realm of historical conclusions, we make it historically and educationally meaningless (Berenbaum & Roth, 1989). Elie Wiesel compares it to night and treats it as a sacred mystery that can be approached but never understood (Wiesel, 1985).

In comparison to other genocides, the Holocaust differs in many ways, and this comparison may provide future generations with a more accurate picture of what occurred, enabling them to draw conclusions relevant to their own times (Rosenbaum, 2001). Many scholars believe that the uniqueness of the Holocaust can only be recognized through comparisons with other genocides (Milchman & Rosenberg, 1996). The importance of the ongoing dialogue over Holocaust uniqueness recognizes that how we shape the events influences how the story is told. Many people strongly believe that the Holocaust was either a unique or a universal event (Barlow, 1997). Some scholars are now stating that the Holocaust is neither unique nor universal but instead an interruption in human history that must be studied (Barlow, 1997). Regardless of which view is accepted, the competing views
make it even more complex for educators to create an account that will be accepted and understood by many (Rosenbaum, 2001).

The debate of universality verses uniqueness has many implications for future Holocaust education. If the Holocaust is a universal event, lessons can be identified and compared with other genocides. Universality asserts that basic truths about human nature can be revealed from the Holocaust, and we can learn from those truths. Scholars and historians who believe the Holocaust is unique hold firm to the idea that it is genocide unparalleled to any other (Novick, 1999). The theory of the uniqueness of the Holocaust asserts that the lessons that confront us in this extraordinary event will not be applicable to ordinary life (Novick, 1999). Furthermore, this hypothesis has led to criticism on the grounds that lessons are usually found in daily life situations, to which average people can relate, as opposed to extreme and unusual circumstances (Novick, 1999). The next section will examine the history and major objectives of Holocaust education in the United States.

*Holocaust Education in the United States: A Brief Overview*

For nearly three decades following the liberation of the concentration camps, the study of the Holocaust was virtually absent from the secondary school curricula (Bialystok, 1995). The Holocaust is a difficult event to teach; educators must determine what objectives can be accomplished and find the appropriate methodology and resources (Bialystok, 1995). Research on the history of Holocaust education is scarce (Haynes, 1997). Much of the research and writings on the Holocaust deals mostly with the literature used to teach the subject, not the
pedagogical debates (Haynes, 1997). As a result, the subject of the Holocaust and genocides present many challenges to the education system. It raises critical historical, moral, and emotional issues (Harel & Shkedi, 2004).

Attempts to teach about the Holocaust in U.S schools date back to the 1970s and early 1980s (Ben-Bassat, 2000). President Jimmy Carter’s Commission on the Holocaust concluded that the Holocaust should be a part of the curriculum in every educational system throughout the country (Wiesel, 1979). This presented a precarious situation for scholars and educators of Holocaust education who expressed a grave concern over the “sudden proliferation of courses of study and curricula about the Holocaust” (Totten, 1999a p. 323). Although state governments and departments of education were voicing the need for Holocaust education, there were no mandates or requirements for teachers to enroll in accredited courses in Holocaust history, literature, or pedagogy (Totten, 1999a).

The movement to teach the Holocaust in the 1970s was implemented by the creativity and initiative of teachers (Fallace, 2006). The momentum to teach about the Holocaust was a grassroots movement started by teachers, many of who were not Jewish (Fallace, 2006). States mandating the teaching of the Holocaust contradicted the manner in which the movement emerged (Fallace, 2006). By and large, the movement began with a few ambitious teachers who wanted history lessons to transform the lives of their students (Fallace, 2006). Teaching the history of the Holocaust is of critical importance and must be accomplished with appropriate resources and methodology (Fallace, 2006). In an attempt to provide much needed
direction, Holocaust scholars began to grapple with the issue of Holocaust pedagogy for classroom teachers (Fallace, 2006).

*Legislation to teach about the Holocaust.*

In New York, New Jersey, Florida, California, and Illinois, studying the Holocaust is a state-mandated curriculum, while in many additional states it is highly recommended (Ben-Bassat, 2000). Only three states have specified grade levels for implementing instruction (Brabham, 1997). California laws set Holocaust education into a broader context of human rights studies, including separate courses on the topic for middle and high school students (Brabham, 1997). In recent years, the Holocaust, Genocide, Human Rights, and Tolerance Education Act of 2003 passed through the California legislature (Svonkin, 2002). Paul Koretz, Assemblymember and author of the bill, notes that California is now poised to become a model state in using the Holocaust and genocide education to teach about human rights and other issues of intolerance and bigotry (Svonkin, 2002).

New Jersey has legislated the most comprehensive Holocaust education program, including curricula for kindergarten through twelfth grade (Brabham, 1997). The mandate in New Jersey requires that education about the Holocaust and genocides be taught in an appropriate place in all grades from K through 12 (Sepinwall, 1999). Ten states have supported Holocaust studies with materials instead of mandates (Brabham, 1997). Many states have developed their own state curriculum for teaching the history of the Holocaust (Brabham, 1997).
Teacher rationale for teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides.

Elie Weisel challenged teachers to consider the following:

How do you teach events that defy knowledge, experiences that go beyond imagination? How do you tell children, big and small, that society could lose its mind and start murdering its own soul and its own father? How do you unveil horrors without offering at the same time some measure of hope?

(Wiesel, 1979 p. 32)

Effective teaching about genocides must offer students more than the sensational facts and dates of atrocities (Feinberg & Totten, 1995). Students need to understand the processes that can result in genocide, as well as the human force that can prevent or resist it (Singer, 2003).

Studying the Holocaust, genocide, and human rights are inseparable and should be at the center of citizenship education in a democracy (Fernekes & Shiman, 1999). Human rights education challenges students to grapple with other perspectives and to recognize that human rights issues occur within their own country and community, not just in foreign lands (Fernekes & Shiman, 1999). Providing Holocaust education is one way to raise young people’s awareness of prejudice, injustice, and hatred (Donnelly, 2006). However, there are emotional difficulties intrinsic in studying the Holocaust for both teacher and student, as this subject chronicles hate, discrimination, cruelty, and human suffering (Ben-Bassat, 2000). Anti-Semitism is defined as hostility towards Jews as individuals, toward Judaism as a religion, toward the Jewish people as a group (Bolkosky, Ellias,&
Hate speech is defined as bigoted speech attacking or disparaging a social or ethnic group or a member of such a group (Henry, 2004).

The Holocaust is well represented in many of the nation’s schools’ English/language arts and history curricula (Donnelly, 2006). Teachers report including the Holocaust as part of the curriculum for personal, education, and historical reasons (Donnelly, 2006). Additionally, teachers expect that studying the Holocaust will make students aware of the dangers of prejudice and promote respect for human lives (Donnelly, 2006). Therefore, many believe that a future Holocaust could be prevented if proper education on the dangers of intolerance, racism, and prejudice is administered throughout the U.S. (Donnelly, 2006). Many teachers in our nation’s schools are teaching about genocides and the Holocaust; however, there is much room for growth in this field (Donnelly, 2006). Teaching about the Holocaust must include the presentation of multiple objectives, accurately convey the socio-historical content, and go beyond simply gaining cognitive knowledge (Gallant & Hartman, 2001). For Holocaust education to be truly meaningful, it must apply the lessons of our past to our plans for the future (Gallant & Hartman, 2001).

A large numbers of teachers who did not include Holocaust education in their curriculum report that this was due to their personal lack of knowledge of the subject and lack of preparation to teach this subject (Donnelly, 2006). Additionally, teachers may exclude it from their curriculum for reasons such as lack of time rather than philosophical differences (Donnelly, 2006).
One-quarter of teachers reported history textbooks as their source of knowledge (Donnelly, 2006). Teachers who received professional development training on the Holocaust were more likely to teach the topic than those that did not (Donnelly, 2006). The aforementioned highlights how teachers could greatly benefit from high-quality teacher training (Donnelly, 2006). Notably, teachers reported informal learning as the most prevalent way they acquired knowledge about the Holocaust (Donnelly, 2006). “To create a study or curriculum of the Holocaust in which all students are left with something to ponder for the rest of their lives would be worth the time, effort, and agony of confronting such horrific events and issues” (Totten, 1998, p. 54). An overwhelming number of teachers surveyed believe the Holocaust is relevant to students’ lives today (Donnelly, 2006). Holocaust studies are a relevant topic as they help promote student’s tolerance for others and their understanding of prejudice, and they may be a way to prevent future acts of genocide (Donnelly, 2006). Furthermore, there is an absence of reliable information on how the Holocaust is actually taught in U.S. schools (Donnelly, 2006).

Curricula and current pedagogical debates in Holocaust education.

A variety of curriculum models are in use in schools today. Among these curricula are the model created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum which emphasizes genocides of the past century and encourages comparative analysis of the Holocaust with other genocides (Gallant & Hartman, 2001). This approach strives to explore what we can learn from the Holocaust and other genocides and how we can respond effectively to policies and practices by world
governments (Gallant & Hartman, 2001). The U.S. Holocaust Museum opened in 1993 and became central to Holocaust education in the U.S. (Ben-Bassat, 2000). The museum trains teachers, creates curriculum, maintains an education center, and is considered an authoritative agent for education in this field (Ben-Bassat, 2000). In collaboration with the museum, Samuel Totten developed the first comprehensive set of guidelines for identifying the most significant lessons students can learn about the Holocaust, as well as how a particular reading, image, document, or film is an appropriate medium for conveying the selected Holocaust lesson (Bialystok, 1995).

An additional type of curriculum in use is the incorporation of human rights education into the Holocaust curriculum guidelines (Gallant & Hartman, 2001). This curriculum encourages students to make a connection between the Holocaust and contemporary violations of human rights to gain understanding of the Holocaust (Gallant & Hartman, 2001).

Teachers use many different resources and media to teach the Holocaust (Donnelly, 2006). The highest proportion of teachers reported using films and firsthand accounts of the Holocaust (Donnelly, 2006). Children's literature is a way to convey the importance of remembering what happened, educating without overwhelming children (Jordan, 2004). Through literature, students are able to get a glimpse into what life was like for children their age in 1930s and 1940s Europe (Totten, 1999b). Accordingly, Holocaust literature must be accompanied and preceded by studies of historical works (Brabham, 1997).
The quest to understand is the most important endeavor of a student of history (Riley, 1996). As such, the core of Holocaust education should be to expose students to authentic historical testimonies as well as access to personal stories of eyewitnesses (Harel & Shkedi, 2004). The most common approach to teaching the Holocaust is from a human rights perspective (Donnelly, 2006). Teachers reported including Holocaust instruction as part of a unit on multicultural literature rather than as part of a unit on World War II (Donnelly, 2006). Some state standards enable Holocaust education to be taught under language arts standards that emphasize appreciation of different cultures (Donnelly, 2006). Much of the debate over Holocaust education has focused on the impact on students’ emotions (Short, 2003).

In recent years, the age at which the students should be introduced to the Holocaust has emerged as a topic of debate (Short, 2003). U.S. academics that advocate teaching about the Holocaust in kindergarten through 8th grade emphasize the subject matter as a source of moral guidance and less as a historical event (Short, 2003). The assumption that Jews were discriminated against and murdered just for lack of respect of their culture is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Holocaust (Short, 2003). Importantly, the teaching of tolerance and respect for cultures and Holocaust studies needs to be well defined and seen as separate educational endeavors (Short, 2003). The interest in teaching lessons to youth in the U.S. has overwhelmed the need to teach why this event took place (California State Legislature, 2003). The Holocaust has become an instrument for teaching values and morals (California State Legislature, 2003).
Currently, some of the arguments against Holocaust education in primary grades are that young children are intellectually incapable of handling the historical context in which the tragedy of the Holocaust unfolded (Totten, 1999b). The primary purpose of Holocaust education should be to focus on teaching students the history of the Holocaust, what happened and why it happened (Totten, 1999b). It is particularly troubling to incorporate these concepts into primary curriculum (Totten, 1999b). With this in mind, if the curriculum neglects the history, then educators must determine the purpose of Holocaust education (Totten, 1999b). Therefore, many believe that young children will struggle with the history of the Holocaust because of its complexities and fear that they will suffer emotionally if exposed to such horrors (Short, 2003; Totten, 1999b).

The guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust are laid out by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and include avoiding easy generalizations, making careful distinctions about sources of information, avoiding comparisons of pain, and avoiding simple answers to complex questions in history (Parson & Totten, 1994). Thus, the obligations of teachers to provide developmentally appropriate materials is heightened in Holocaust curricula by the need to avoid characterization that might demonize the perpetrators, sanctify the victims, or glorify the rescuers (Parson & Totten, 1994). Additionally, those who support teaching about the Holocaust in primary school will have to recognize the extensive foundational work needed to familiarize young children with the nature of Jewish culture and identity (Short,
The most important reason to teach the Holocaust is to understand the past so that we can explain the present (Friedman, Friedlander, & Blustein, 2005).

*The Adolescent Generation: Studies of U.S. Adolescents*

The word *adolescence* originates from the Latin *adolescentia*, which refers to the process of developing or growing up (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000).

Society has two responsibilities towards its adolescents. The first is to support the search for the pieces of the adolescence puzzles that is still unknown. The second is to use the knowledge and the more complete understanding of this period of life to better facilitate and nurture adolescents’ development.

(Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000, pg 46)

Adolescence is a time of transition, experimentation, and change (Kadushin, Kelner, Saxe, Brodsky, 2000). Erikson (1968) conceptualized adolescence as a time of identity formation, when young people attempt to draw some conclusions about their place in the world. The teenage years are a path to adulthood, as children separate from their parents and find their way (Kadushin et al., 2000). Today’s teenagers are put under a certain amount of strain having to delay the beginning of their productive lives through an extended period of mandated schooling that may not meet their developmental needs (Hine, 1999). Adolescents begin to make adult decisions about their lifestyle, beliefs, habits, and career (Maier, 1969). Rather than simply accepting what they learn at face value, adolescents begin to question new information and examine it through various political, religious, or philosophical lenses (Campbell, 1976).
A large part of identity formation for adolescents is experimentation with different identities; adolescence is a time for young people to safely experiment with social or ideological groups in their search for one cohesive self image (Maier, 1969). Adults often view this experimentation as extreme, but it is critical for growth. In fact, Erickson (1968) argued that the search for identity is the most important task in an adolescent’s development. James Marcia proposed that identity can only be formed through examining many, meaningful identity choices and then committing to one, specific identity (Santrock, 2008). The extent of the exploration adolescents engage in will, in large part, determine how satisfied they will be with their eventual adult identity (Marcia, 1980).

Adolescents’ search to establish an adult identity begins at a time when they are exceptionally idealistic and open to new ideas (Campbell, 1976; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Maier, 1969). They become interested in the idea of utopias or forming the best possible version of something, and they are able to consider many possibilities to achieve that goal (Maier, 1969; Woolfolk, 2008). Concepts such social justice, intellectual courage, and morality play a large role in many adolescents’ decision making processes (Maier, 1969). Adolescents’ morality and idealism lead them to consider identities or join groups that will help them change society in a positive way (Campbell, 1976; Maier, 1969). This heightened awareness of ideals and possibilities leads adolescents though “a phase in which [they attribute] an unlimited power to [their] own thoughts so that the dream of a glorious future or of transforming the world through ideas…seems to be not only fantasy but also an
As they experiment with new identities and ideals, the role of their family changes in adolescents’ lives. Whereas young children look to their parents for acceptance and validation, adolescents begin to look outside their immediate circle of adults and role models for this acceptance (Maier, 1969). Peer and social groups become increasingly powerful influences on behavior and beliefs as adolescents search for an identity with which they are comfortable (Maier, 1969). While interacting with these different peer groups and experimenting with different roles, adolescents are in the process of discovering for themselves which ones stand up, which are approved by social groups, and which are not working for them (Campbell, 1976; Maier, 1969).

Developing an identity is not a process that begins and ends during adolescence; it is a lifelong task filled with many challenges (Read, Fordham, & Adler, 1954). Nevertheless, adolescence is an extremely critical period; adults with strong sense of their own identity have good senses of their strengths, weaknesses, and unique talents because they have had the opportunity to test them (Learning Theories, 2008). The act of exploring, learning, and achieving goals sets the stage for future successes and development in the life of an adolescent (Maier, 1969).

The theories of developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and Erik Erikson (1968) noted: adolescence is a time of profound change. Adolescence is the main time for identity formation, and they are eager to be
affirmed by peers and teachers (Erikson, 1968). Within Erikson’s model of adolescent development, identity development is the primary developmental task of the fifth stage (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents experience a crisis between identity formation and identity confusion. Adolescents in the United States are a group that has been the most closely studied in the world (Amyan-Nolley & Tiara, 2000). A review of more than 2000 journal articles published between 1985 and 1995 found that psychological research reflects a cultural bias view of adolescents as troubled, unstable, vulnerable, and often antisocial (Amyan-Nolley & Tiara, 2000). Positive aspects of adolescent development, such as creativity, are underrepresented in the research. Contrary to popular beliefs of adolescent rebellion and parental powerlessness, only 5 to10 percent of families experience a considerable deterioration in parent-child relations during adolescents (Steinberg, 1996). Adolescents in the 1990s and 2000s face a more complex, uncertain future than previous generations, especially the prospect of extending schooling after high school (Steinberg, 1996). More than 90 % of high school seniors expect to go to college, and more than 70% look forward to working in professional jobs (Schneider &Stevenson, 1999). No single institution does more to shape the lives of American adolescents than schools (Kadushin et al., 2000). Teenagers spend the majority of their time inside a single institution, immersed in an age-stratified community of peers (Eckert, 1989). A variety of school based extra-curricula activities concentrates teens’ social life within the institutional setting (Hine, 1999).
In a national survey of high school seniors, 58% stated that religion was important to them (Bachman, 1997). In an additional survey, 76% of 13 to 17 year olds said that they believed in a personal God, and 74% prayed occasionally (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992). Altruistic behavior in teenagers and attendance at religious services as well as belief that religion is important are directly correlated (Donahue & Benson, 1995). Adolescents seem to go through a period of questioning and struggling with values and explore roles in order to find an identity that is unique and fits in with the larger society (Erikson, 1968).

**Ethnic Identity Development**

The term identity points to individuals’ link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of their people (Erikson, 1980). Adolescence is a time of intense physical, emotional, and psychological transition and is the time for establishing identity (Henry, 2004).

The integration now taking place in the form of ego identity is more than the sum of the childhood identifications. It is the inner capital accrued from all those experiences of each successive stage when successful identification led to a successful alignment of the individual’s basic drives with his endowment and his opportunities. (Erikson, 1968, p. 89)

An ethnic group is a social group whose members have the following characteristics: they share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinctive history, share one or more common cultural traits, and feel a sense of unique collective solidarity (Hollinger, 1995). Ethnicity describes the identity that
people pass from one generation to another. Ethnicity is self-perceived and can change over time (Perlmutter, 1992). Ethnicity can be defined as an ascribed or self-identified affiliation typically based on aspects of one’s family heritage, shared language, culture, or nationality (Hudley & Wakefield, 2006). An additional definition states ethnic identity is a sense of psychological connection within a group of people who have a common history that is traceable to a common place of origin (Phinney, 1992).

Adolescents begin a process of self-discovery including their occupational or career identity, religious identity, gender identity, and racial or ethnic identity (Erikson, 1968). With increased ethnic diversity, adolescents interact across racial and ethnic lines in their communities and schools, making ethnic differences more complicated than was true for those living in racial and ethnic enclaves (Hudley & Wakefield, 2006). Individuals are likely to feel shame or disconnect from their own ethnic identity when positive ethnic group messages are not available to counteract negative messages (Phinney, 1992). Some of the findings from research on the development of ethnic and racial identity confirm that ethnic identity has a positive relationship with self-esteem for adolescents from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Hudley & Wakefield, 2006). From a sociological perspective, ethnicity refers to a biological relationship between people who identify with a specific group or who share a demographic category (Jalali, 1988).

One model of ethnic identity development proposes that members of ethnic groups progress through three stages (Phinney, 1992). The stages begin with
unexamined ethnic identity in which individuals have unexamined positive or negative views of their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). Second, individuals engage in an ethnic identity search (or exploration) in which they begin to discover what it means to be a member of a particular ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). Finally, achieved ethnic identity occurs when individuals have explored their ethnic group membership and are clear as to the meaning of ethnicity in their life (Phinney, 1992). An important aspect of adolescence is ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1989). After an individual moves through the stages of identity development, they are able to come to terms with their sense of self as a member of their ethnic group and have a positive group-esteem (French & Seidman, 2006). Individuals at higher stages of development enjoy a higher level of self-esteem (Moradi & Hasan, 2004; Phinney & Chavira, 1994). Compared to their older counterparts, younger adolescents are less resolved in their ethnic identity and become more resolved with the passage of time and advancing age (Phinney, 1992). Adolescents at more advanced stages of ethnic identity development report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety and a more positive self concept (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004). Experiences of racism or discrimination are related to lower self-esteem, increased depressive symptoms, increased behavioral problems, and heightened general psychological distress (Hudley & Wakefield, 2006).

_Conceptualizing Jewish Identity_

One of the greatest challenges when discussing Jewish identity in the United States is that Jews do not fit into an established notion of ethnic, racial,
national, or religious identity in this country (MacDonald-Dennis, 2006). A clearly defined concept of Jewish ethnic identity has eluded scholars of Judaism (Dubow, Pargament, Boxer & Tarakeshwar, 2000). Researchers disagree on the use of the term race and ethnicity (Hudley & Wakefield, 2006). Jewish identity poses problems for social scientists because, unlike ethnic identity for other groups, Judaism is not characterized easily by skin color or country of origin (Steinberg, 1989). Jewish ethnic identity assumes minority status in two areas: ethnic identity and religious beliefs (Dubow et al., 2000). Like many other ethnic groups, Jewish people are not uniform in their cultural identification, and Jewish ethnicity does not imply religious observance (Friedman et al., 2005). Jewish identity includes components described as common across ethnic groups and group specific practices such as customs and religious beliefs (Dubow et al., 2000). Individuals possessing a Jewish identity are likely to be subject to the same issues that apply to other ethnic groups, such as assimilation and discrimination (Dubow et al., 2000). Ethnic identity is a useful but imprecise way to examine Jewish identity because there are many ethnic groups within the Jewish community, such as Sephardim, Mizrachim, and Ashkenazim (MacDonald-Dennis, 2006). Jews are characterized as an ethnic group in the United States (MacDonald-Dennis, 2006). Ethnic identity seems most often to be a frame in which individuals identify consciously or unconsciously with those with whom they have a common bond because of similar traditions, behaviors, languages, values, and beliefs (Breitman, 1995). In the United States, where ethnicity is often viewed in relation to access to power and wealth, Jews are represented at all socioeconomic
levels, and they tend to not be viewed in the same way as other minority groups (Rosen & Weltman, 1996). Contemporary Jews are less likely to be fearful of anti-Semitic attacks than they were fifty years ago, they are also less conscious of their heritage and more prone to internalized anti-Semitism (Langman, 1999).

_Jewish American adolescents._

In the past decade, a body of research has surfaced about Jewish–American adolescents in relation to their uniqueness as Jews as well as their being typical Americans (Kadushin et al., 2000). Many Jewish youth appear more firmly rooted in American than in Jewish culture, and only peripherally involved in the Jewish community (Kadushin et al., 2000). Jewish youth have a particular dilemma, as they are two generations removed from World War II and the Holocaust, one of the most difficult eras in the history of the Jewish people (Kadushin et al., 2000). Few Jewish American adolescents live in communities with a majority of Jews, and most spend little of their time in purely Jewish involvements, such as synagogue and youth groups (Kadushin et al., 2000). Many of the Jewish adolescents spend time moving between the Jewish and secular world, both of which contribute to shaping their identities (Kadushin et al., 2000). This may be one of the several reasons why ethnic identity can be stressful for Jewish adolescents (Dubow et al., 2000).

Early adolescence for Jewish youth is marked by the religious symbolic transition from childhood to adulthood at age 13 through the Bar or Bat Mitzvah (Dubow et al., 2000). This process involves a great deal of studying and includes a public recitation of prayers and readings, and may perhaps be another stressor on
Jewish adolescents (Dubrow et al., 2000). Additionally, adolescents may feel tension between their religious and secular worlds as religious observations interfere with peer and school oriented social activity (Rubin, 1994). This type of tension can be significant, especially in areas of the country where there are few Jewish families, and the majority of the Jewish adolescent’s friends are non-Jewish (Rubin, 1994).

Students’ Perceptions

A pertinent issue in the debate of children understanding the history of the Holocaust is whether students have an understanding of Jewish culture and identity (Short, 2003). This has largely been left out of the debate on the inclusion of Holocaust education into the primary schools (Short, 2003). In hope that children’s perceptions can influence curriculum development, children from two different age groups were asked a series of questions dealing with their awareness of Jews and Jewish culture (Carrington & Short, 1995). When asked if they knew the word Jew or Jewish, the 8 and 9–year-olds had little or no idea to what the word referred (Carrington & Short, 1995). Among those who had some conception of the word, there was a fair amount of confusion (Carrington & Short, 1995). In summary, the researchers concluded that 8 and many 9-year-olds had no concept of a Jew or one that was quite inaccurate (Carrington & Short, 1995). The interview with the 10 and 11-year-olds, which had been previously exposed to a Jewish teacher, were able to distinguish between racial and cultural characteristics of Judaism (Carrington & Short, 1995). To tap into the students’ familiarity with anti-Semitism, they were asked a series of question as to whether they had ever heard anything unkind stated
about Jews (Carrington & Short, 1995). A large percent of the children surveyed answered the questions with stereotypes or pervasive negative views about Jews (Carrington & Short, 1995). In an additional 1993 poll conducted in the U.S. students and adults reported that they thought it possible that the Holocaust had never happened, and many claimed they did not know if the Holocaust had ever happened (Brabham, 1997).

It would be difficult to object to teaching young children the lessons learned from the Holocaust; however, the empirical evidence does not support the assumption that young children can cope intellectually with the complexities of the topic (Carrington & Short, 1995). Much of the evidence and arguments for teaching students at the primary levels is based exclusively on teachers’ views and not on evidentiary research (Carrington & Short, 1995).

**Summary**

On the whole, teaching about the Holocaust and genocides in the United States is a complex issue. The Holocaust has been a pivotal event in the formation of American Jewish identity. Adolescents today are two generations away from the most horrific event in Jewish history. Jewish adolescents resemble their non-Jewish peers in some respects, though their lives are conditioned by having Jewish ancestors and experiences that are unique. This has a direct impact on how American Jewish adolescents perceive their religion and themselves.

What affective impact does the study of the Holocaust have on students, with regard to their perception of discrimination, racism, and understanding of the
historical content? Understanding how the historical content can influence students’ school experiences today is important to the Jewish people and Jewish students’ school success as well as all students.

The focus of this thesis is to answer the question: What are Jewish students’ experiences in a rural northern California community? The next chapter will detail the methods used to gather and process the data, as well as an introduction to the participants.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Being an adolescent is a difficult time in general. Being from a different ethnic or religion group from the majority of the school community can be a challenge for many teenagers. This research on students’ experiences in relation to their ethnic identity is based on a questionnaire and interviews of ten local Jewish high school students, ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen. Their experiences were gathered through a mixed methods questionnaire and oral interviews. One major goal of this research was to take a closer look at Jewish students’ experiences in local schools in the North Coast of California and to determine their differences and similarities as they pertain to anti-Semitism as well as their personal struggles with ethnic identity.

The following chapter will outline the development of a mixed methods questionnaire and focus group interviews used to find out what students’ personal experiences were as they connected to their Jewish identity, and how these may have affected their school experiences, peer relations, and ethnic identity. Next, it will describe participant recruitment and selection. Finally, this chapter describes the organization and analysis of results.
Development of Research Instrument

Based on my research question and identity research from a review of the literature, I compiled a questionnaire to seek more insight into questions about local students’ high school experiences as they pertain to being Jewish.

I was originally going to include college students in my survey population but decided to only have high school students participate. I had more access to the high school population, as my daughter is fifteen, and we are connected to a local Jewish community. I also considered that where the students grew up would have an influence on the answers in the survey, and I was interested in examining the experiences of students in the rural northern California community in which I live and work where the Jewish population is small. Students from our local university would not have had the same or similar experiences if they were from cities with a larger Jewish community. This posed a few problems in terms of working with minors, but they were readily resolved. Some of the issues I encountered were the confidentiality of the surveys and interviews, and the possible emotional effect of the questions on the adolescents due to the nature of the subject matter. I communicated with the local Rabbi to have her as support available if the participants should need it. Parent/guardian and participant consent forms were sent out to all participants, as well as information about the Rabbi’s support services. The questionnaire was completely voluntary and anonymous. When formatting the questionnaire, I used a combination of Likert scales, yes and no questions, and open ended responses. If a
question called for an open-ended response, participants had a space provided to write their answers.

The instrument was a 16 item self-administered survey which covered aspects of the participants’ experiences with Jewish identity and education. The participants surveyed were asked what in life was most important to them. The choices included contributing to society, being with family, spending time with friends, having a lot of money, acknowledging their Jewish identity, getting a good education, having people admire them, and having fun. They chose from a scale from one to eight, one being the most important and eight being the least important. They were asked several open-ended questions about their personal experiences with anti-Semitism or other hate speech regarding race or religion, as well as what they would do if they did encountered such an experience. The instrument included quantitative items, open-ended items, and demographic items including participants’ age, sex, and grade enrolled in at school. It also included a final question asking if they would be interested in participating in a focus group interview. (See appendix A for the complete questionnaire). I sent out twenty surveys and received ten surveys back completed. Out of the ten complete surveys I received, eight of the participants indicated being interested in participating in the focus group interview. Four ended up participating in the interview, but all ten participants filled out the questionnaire.
Participants

Many of the participants I recruited for this study were a group of students who were involved in a youth group through a local synagogue. Their families were members of the local synagogue as well. I received the addressees from a directory the Temple provided. I communicated beforehand the purpose of my study to many of the parents and guardians of the potential participants. Ten adolescents aged fourteen to eighteen chose to participate in the survey. They were all children I have known from the Jewish community, and they all attended different local area high schools. Sixty percent of the participants were boys, and 40% were girls. All were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participants were fully informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. Parent/guardian consent forms as well as participant consent forms were mailed out with the instrument. Participants were informed that all responses in the survey and group interview were of a confidential nature and were asked to respect that confidentiality. The participants were asked not to talk with people outside of the group about what was discussed in the group interview.

Potential benefits including increasing the knowledge of basic research regarding the feeling and perceptions of Jewish adolescents’ identity and school experiences in a rural northern California community. Personal benefits to the participants included having the opportunity to share their experiences of being Jewish in a rural community. It was also an opportunity for them to reflect on their
own experiences with anti-Semitism and their ethnic identities. Information participants provided could lead to further local studies of tolerance and diversity training for our local school districts. The risks to participants in this included those of an emotional nature, such as the potential for discomfort and for personal previous experiences with prejudice to emerge. Counseling was available for all subjects if needed. Participants were informed that they could end their participation at any time.

Procedure

As a Jewish woman and a mother of a teenager who attends a local high school, I had to assess my own potential bias before reading and coding the responses. The survey that I created decreased the likelihood that I would read any of my own personal biases into my participants’ responses. I developed the survey utilizing qualitative as well as quantitative questions. I had others assess it to ensure the questions were unbiased and not leading in any way. I sent out the surveys and each survey for themes and patterns. Themes emerged as the respondents discussed their experiences. The narratives as well as the qualitative data were organized and sorted into various themes. I coded the different areas and organized them into the core themes that arose from the participants’ experiences: students’ experiences with anti-Semitism in their schools, the ways in which their involvement in their community and family traditions influenced their Jewish identities, their comfort in
going to an adult when faced with prejudice in school, and any other personal experiences they were willing to share.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted at my home. The parents were notified that they could be in close proximity to the participants during the interview if they wanted. During the group interview, I read the agreement to participate aloud. Participants were notified of potential risks and benefits of the interview process. At the beginning of each interview, all participants were reminded that they had the choice to discontinue the study at any time without any negative consequences. I explained that I was using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The interviews were taped with a digital voice recorder. Participants were asked eight semi-structured questions. The questions solicited information about the students’ experiences in school. The questions specifically dealt with their experiences being Jewish in a rural California community and the ways in which they perceived that being Jewish affected their school experience. Students were asked to share experiences of anti-Semitism and their feelings about it. In addition, they were also asked how comfortable they felt going to administration or adults at their school when these incidents happened. They were asked to share any other of their life experiences being Jewish and living in a rural community. Lastly, they were questioned on how much they learned about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in school. Four local
teenagers were interviewed for forty-five minutes. They all had previously filled out a questionnaire.

After the interview session, I listened to the recordings and took notes, transcribing the interviews verbatim. I coded the themes and organized the data into categories for further analysis.

Conclusion

The survey and interviews provided much insight into the students’ experiences in high school in a rural northern California community where there are very few Jewish students. Narrative and quantitative data were sorted into various themes based on the survey questions and the interview questions. As I compared the participants’ data, core themes emerged which illustrated the participants’ perspectives about their experiences dealing with prejudice in school, adult responses, and education on the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in the schools. The following chapter will present the results of the survey and the student’s personal narratives.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the participants’ demographics. It will also detail the responses of participants in the following topics: the importance of their Jewish identity, the values they find most important, as well as their education and involvement in the Jewish community. It will also includes their school experiences dealing with anti-Semitism or other prejudice, their comfort level approaching adults in their school concerning these types of experiences, responses of teachers or administrators to the incidents, and other experiences growing up Jewish in a rural community.

Participants

Ten local high school students connected to the local Jewish community participated in the study. Four of the adolescents participated in the interview. All of the participants attended various local high schools and this sample came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

One hundred percent of the participants confirmed that being Jewish mattered to them, ranging from somewhat to very much. Eighty percent of the participants stated that they always identified themselves as Jewish. Twenty percent acknowledged that they occasionally identified themselves as Jewish.

Participants were asked to chose what principle was the most important to
their lives: contributing to society, being with family, spending time with friends, having a lot of money, acknowledging their Jewish identity, getting a good education, having people admire them, and having fun. Eighty percent of the participants chose being with family as the most important to them, followed by spending time with friends (60%). Forty percent of the surveyed adolescents chose getting a good education as being third most important to their lives.

One hundred percent of the participants in this study attended a weekly religious school program throughout their elementary and middle school years. They all partook in the coming of age ritual of a bar or bat–mitzvah. All were still involved in their Jewish education through different involvement experiences. Sixty percent of the students participated in the Jewish community through family involvement. Twenty percent attended Jewish summer camp, 60% participated in a community youth group, and 10% continued to attend a weekly Hebrew school program through the local synagogue.

One hundred percent of the participants affirmed that most of their friends were not Jewish, and they each had from three to five Jewish friends. A few of the participants declared that during the summer when they were at Jewish camp, all their friends were Jewish.

The next area I will explore is students’ experiences while at school. The next section will report the results of the open-ended questions dealing with the participants’ experiences of anti-Semitism that they have either witnessed or observed. They also had an opportunity to share some of their personal thoughts on
the topics. Narratives in the students’ own voices from the interviews are also included in this section.

*Themes Revealed in the Data*

The salient themes that emerged in the surveys dealt with the students’ experiences dealing with anti-Semitism while at school. The results will report what they observed or witnessed while at school, as well as whom they felt comfortable confiding in regarding their experiences. The adult responses will be addressed as well. Lastly, other personal experiences they desired to share will be relayed in their own words.

*Experiences.*

The students were asked if they had personal experiences concerning anti-Semitism at their school. Eighty percent of the participants personally experienced some type of anti-Semitism at their school, mostly through anti-Semitic remarks. Their responses ranged from what one participant described as hearing “Jew jokes,” to being made fun of, teasing, name calling, and being called a Jew in a derogatory way. Several of the students declared that they heard these jokes often.

An example of a derogatory comment being used towards a student was when Mike, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, stated, “A kid got mad at me because I beat him in basketball, and he told me to go back to Israel.”

Susan, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore, shared her thoughts on being the subject of ridicule, “After reading Anne Frank in class in 6th grade; kids
began making fun of Anne Frank. They also started calling me Anne Frank, because I was the only Jewish kid they knew.”

Additionally, participants were asked if they had witnessed others’ experiencing anti-Semitism at their school, and 40% confirmed they had. The students reported witnessing anti-Semitism at sports activities and other various school activities. Derogatory jokes about Jews were yet again stated as the foremost form of anti-Semitism they had witnessed. They expressed that they were not sure if the kids were in fact anti-Semitic or just ignorant. Most of the participants thought that the students had heard the negative comments on television, popular culture, or from their families.

Natalie, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, agreed that she heard a tremendous amount of ethnic jokes, shared, “I don’t know if they even understand the jokes they are telling. I think they hear a lot of the jokes from the television show South Park. It makes people think that Jews are a joke.”

Observations.

Next, students were asked if they had observed other students using hateful language regarding race or religion at their schools. Eighty percent affirmed they had observed others using hateful language towards students’ in relation to religion or race. Participants confirmed they had observed derogatory language such as “Jew jokes” and people being teased for being Jewish. Lisa, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore, stated, “Kids use negative slang words joking around against Jewish people.” Elliot, a fifteen year old sophomore, noted, ” Some people say, ‘Oh, I’m a
Nazi’ and say ‘Hiel Hitler.’” Mike alleged hearing, “People say ‘You’re such a Jew’ and call each other Jew as if it’s a bad thing.”

Susan shared her thoughts about jokes dealing with Judaism,

I don’t know if kids really mean it; it may just be out of ignorance. If you tell them you are Jewish, they will sometimes apologize. I sometimes confront kids when I hear anti-Semitic jokes, and say hey I am Jewish, letting people know that there are some of us living here.

Natalie had different feelings on her experiences with the jokes. She stated, “Jokes are how kids pick on one another, and it hurts you when you are a kid, you can’t just brush it off.”

Several of the students in this study observed others’ using derogatory language towards students of different cultures or religions. The next area focuses on the findings of what actions students took when they observed or experienced anti-Semitic remarks or other types of discrimination.

**Adult Responses**

Students were invited to elaborate on what the responses of adults were to the students’ anti-Semitic experiences or observations. Fifty percent of the students stated that there was no response from the adults they approached for assistance. Participants reported that adults at their school did nothing when they reported the anti-Semitic incidence. Many of these students believed that there was not much the teachers and administrators could do, even when they knew of the problem.
Susan reflected, “They didn’t believe it at first. They finally talked to the kids. It did not stop right away, and finally after about a year of it continuing I told my mom. She talked to the principal and then the ridiculing stopped.”

However, Elliot provided another perspective of those students who chose not to talk to an adult about the anti-Semitism at their schools. He stated, “If they didn’t see it no one would tell. Kids would be more mean if you told on them.”

Rachel pointed out the lack of adult supervision and the lack of adult intervention at her school, stating, “Adults weren’t around in the hallways. When racial slurs happen half of the teachers ignore it, half talk to the kids outside to disapprove of it.” When asked if the students felt comfortable talking to an adult at school about experiencing or observing anti-Semitism, their responses were equally divided with 50% saying yes, and 50% saying no. The students who felt comfortable going to an adult at school felt the issues needed to be dealt with and not ignored, and that the adults in authority would understand.

Illustrating the duality of their experiences with adults at their schools, Mike noted when an issue arose, “I would feel comfortable going to the teachers’ or administrators, but teachers probably would not be able to do anything about it.” Rob, a seventeen-year-old senior in high school claimed that in his experience “teachers were always responsive.”

Of the students who did not feel comfortable going to an adult, the reasons for their discomfort varied. Many of the students who were uncomfortable going to an adult felt that the issue or teasing would get worse if they went to the
administration. Others felt that the teachers and administration did not have the expertise to deal with it effectively. Illustrative of this lack of belief in adults’ abilities to intervene effectively were comments from Lisa, Glen, and Greg. Lisa claimed, “Adults in my school don’t do anything.” Glen asserted that in response to anti-Semitic remarks from another student, he had “told the baseball coach, but he didn’t do anything.” Natalie expressed her lack of faith in the effectiveness of adult interventions at her school, stating, “I would rather stand up to it being Jewish instead of having teachers scold them ineffectively.” In attempting to explain adults’ lack of response, Greg said that adults at his school didn’t intervene “because times are different, and the hate has changed meanings; teachers don’t care so much.”

Many of these students felt they just had to deal with it and to suffer in silence. Susan’s comment was illustrative of this when she stated, “I thought the teasing would get worst if they knew I had told.”

Rachel had a philosophical approach to dealing with the anti-Semitic remarks at her school, stating, “I don’t get super offended because the majority of the time people aren’t serious, and I don’t find it necessary to involve authorities.” Lisa expressed the notion that she had other resources at her disposal in dealing with anti-Semitism at her school, saying, “I do not need to talk to an adult at school, I am more comfortable going to friends and family when I have a problem.”

Students were asked if they learned about anti-Semitism in their school experiences. Ninety percent stated that they had learned some about anti-Semitism at school. When asked how much time they spent learning about the Holocaust in
school, 70% percent spent some time learning about the Holocaust in school, with 20% stating that they spent a great deal of time learning about the Holocaust in school.

**Additional personal experiences.**

I left space on the survey for the participants to add any other information about their experiences being Jewish in rural northern California high schools.

Many shared their pride in their culture. One participant noted, “I love being Jewish.” Another participant wrote that she “felt like a minority.” Mike found a positive side to being Jewish in this small rural community, stating, “Being one of the few Jews at Small Town High, people think it’s cool that I’m Jewish because it is something they are not used to.”

Susan presented a less positive perspective in terms of her experiences, explaining,

Whenever anything about being Jewish came up, I was always asked all the questions and singled out. I did not always know all the answers, even the teachers did not know a lot about Judaism. When I took days off of school for holidays, teachers got upset because I was not in school.

Some of the participants’ stated that they felt isolated and different at times. Natalie shared, “I always felt different, I think from having such a small Jewish community. I take pride in being Jewish.” Elliot’s comments echoed this sense of difference, stating, “There are very few Jewish kids at my school, and I feel very isolated at
times.” Additionally, Mike shared, “For the most part, everyone has been casually curious about what Jews believe. They really do not know much about our culture.”

Many of the participants shared that their bar/bat mitzvah was a stressful but great experience. Frank affirmed, “Having a bar mitzvah really opened my friends’ eyes to the Jewish religion.” Greg’s comments offered additional evidence of this, noting that, “a lot of people seemed envious, and said they wished they were Jewish too so they could have a bar mitzvah.”

Susan found her bat mitzvah helped her non-Jewish friends and teachers understand more about her religion, stating,

Having a bat mitzvah it made me feel different in a positive way. It was a lot of work, but when my teachers and fellow students came and saw the ceremony, they understood more about my life and my identity. They understood my culture more and were more supportive. I definitely did not have as much trouble with kids making fun of me for being Jewish after my bat mitzvah.

Many of the participants shared their pride and love of their culture and religion. Having a bar/bat mitzvah helped demonstrate these feelings with their larger community. They also shared experiencing stress and difficult times, and feeling isolated, as well as exhibiting amazing resiliency.
Summary

The students in this survey shared similar experiences about growing up and attending school in a rural community in California. Most of the participants shared being Jewish was very important to them, and they were proud of their Jewish identity. They all had a bat or bar mitzvah, and they were all still active to some degree in their local Jewish community, mainly through family involvement and a local youth group.

Many of the participants had experienced some form of anti-Semitism at their school, mostly through derogatory jokes and remarks. Forty percent witnessed others experiencing anti-Semitism, again mostly jokes and derogatory language.

Several of the participants observed others in their school using hateful language regarding a student’s race or religion. Half of the students were comfortable talking to an adult at school about witnessing or experiencing anti-Semitism. The overwhelming responses of the students were that there was no response from the adults they went to, and when they did, they believed there was not much that the adults could do.

Participant responses were varied, but many common themes and experiences relating to their high school experiences with their Jewish identity emerged. The themes I will explore in the analysis are the resiliency of the adolescents’, their cross-cultural competency, importance of family, friends, and school. In addition I will explore their experiences dealing with anti-Semitism and adults responses. The following chapter presents an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS

Introduction

The question that guided this study was: What are Jewish student experiences in high school in a rural northern California community? The responses from the participants revealed that many of the students are having similar experiences in school with derogatory or hateful speech towards them because they are Jewish. All of the adolescents who participated in this project had confidence in themselves and their culture and were proud to be Jewish. Students observed and experienced anti-Semitism while at local area high schools. For the most part, they did not feel like the administrators and teachers would take effective actions if they told them of their experiences.

The following is an analysis of the data broken into the following categories: resilience of the adolescents’; cross cultural competence; importance of family, friends, and school; experiences dealing with anti-Semitism; and adults responses.

Resilience

The students in this study showed an enormous amount of resiliency in the face of anti-Semitic comments and harassment at their schools. I attribute this resiliency to a strong sense of community and family ties. Not only were these young people searching for their identities as adolescents, they brought with them a history of stories of survival, religious traditions, and the pressure to preserve this special cultural identity that separates them from other groups. The influence of their Jewish

48
values appears to have helped them to gain the needed self-confidence to deal with the difficulties of being a minority group, or more often the only Jewish person, in the schools. Their history has not left them, but rather it has helped to shape their ethnic identity and nurtured their inner strength.

Cross-Cultural Competence

For centuries, Jewish adolescents have traveled the paths of biculturality. The young Jewish participants’ identity will determine the strength and continuity of this minority group. Due to the small size of the community in which they live, the participants were forced to seek friends outside the Jewish community. The adolescents in this study demonstrated an ability to assimilate and mix successfully with the larger society, demonstrating a facility to function well in both their own Jewish culture and the dominant culture. This competence allowed the students to have successful experiences in school even in the face of prejudice. Further, their families placed a high value on education and hold a common expectation that these students would complete high school and go on to college. This family and Jewish community expectation of academic achievement helped to create an environment that nurtured their success in school.

Importance of Family, Friends, and School

These adolescents had a deep connection to their home life and religious traditions. This group of students noted that the most important aspects of their lives were family, friends, and school, in that order. The Jewish culture is deeply rooted in
family and community. Family traditions were acknowledged as the way many of the students have stayed active with the Jewish community. The results suggested that the families provided the greatest impetus to the adolescents’ construction of a Jewish identity. Through interactions with their families, the adolescents learned how to value the importance and the meaning of Jewish traditions, to value its practices, and to keep it relevant for their lives today. Observing the ancient traditions of their culture helped to cement the family bonds as well as strengthened their connection with the Jewish community. The strongest medium of their maturing Jewish identities resided in their homes. Family members provided encouragement and modeling of Jewish values that encouraged their Jewish identity. The importance of their families and family traditions helped these youths to retain their special cultural identity and separated them from other cultures. Being a part of a strong community and remaining active in the Jewish culture kept these students involved in their cultural practices and bolstered their self-esteem as well as their positive ethnic identity.

Experiences, relationships, and education shape and mold adolescents as they evolve into adults. Through these years, adolescents are questioning their identities and searching to discover who they are. Friendships are an integral part of adolescent development. As adolescents separate from their families and develop autonomy, their friendships and relationships help them define who they are. All of the participants stated that most of their friends were not Jewish. The feelings that many
of the adolescents shared were of isolation. Many looked outside of their school setting for interactions with other Jewish adolescents. Synagogue, Jewish camp, Jewish youth groups, and community gatherings were some of the ways that the participants interacted with other Jewish adolescents. This is yet more evidence of the participant’s cultural competency. They sought relationships at their prospective schools that go beyond their cultural comfort, as well as outside their school environment. It confirms that they were deeply steeped in their Jewish identity and had to make an effort to forge important relationships outside of school. Even as many of the adolescents were moving towards autonomy, they still chose to spend a good amount of time with their families engaging in cultural traditions. Their strong family ties as well as a lack of Jewish students at their schools promoted their activity in the Jewish community.

Schooling and education are integral part of Jewish tradition. Jewish children grow up with an expectation that they will go to college. Education has historically been of utmost importance to the Jewish community. School provides a powerful influence on teenagers’ lives. Because of the cultural emphasis on education, school and school performance were important to the participants, and most had positive experiences with schooling even in the face of some difficult situations.

Experiences Dealing with Anti-Semitism

The most common form of anti-Semitism experienced and observed by this group of adolescents was in the form of Jewish jokes. Ethnic jokes abound in popular
culture, particularly television and movies. American youth are inundated with these types of jokes. Most of the participants felt the perpetrators did not necessarily discern what most of the jokes meant or how hurtful they could be. Most of the students claimed they were used to hearing anti-Semitic ridiculing. The students’ resiliency allowed them to keep the jokes from affecting their everyday lives and daily school experiences. Their stable sense of identity came directly from their strong family ties and religious values which in turn engendered a positive and healthy sense of self which may have inoculated them against the harm accrued from hearing jokes and other anti-Semitic comments.

When the jokes the students heard moved from anti-Semitic remarks to comments about the Holocaust, however, the students’ reactions changed. Generally inured to anti-Semitic jokes, participants were far more likely to be hurt and offended when peers made distasteful comments about the Holocaust. Many of the participants had family or friends who were Holocaust survivors. Jewish tradition involves a great deal of education at an early age; therefore, these young people demonstrated a deeper sociological and historical understanding of the Holocaust, and it carried for them a personal connection.

**Adult Responses**

Participants stated that they were unlikely to seek adult intervention when they experienced harassment. The students in this study lacked faith in the ability of the school staff to intervene effectively when harassment occurred on campus. A
majority of the adolescents felt that school staff had little or no understanding of their culture. Thus, they were left feeling hopeless, marginalized, and unprotected by the adults in their school. Participants reported that they feared that telling an adult would exacerbate the situation; everyone would know who had reported the anti-Semitic comments because the participants were often the only Jewish students in the school population. The risk of retaliation and further harassment were the main reason students were unlikely to seek adult intervention. The lack of understanding by teachers of the diversity of their student population posed a detriment to the confidence of these students.

Summary

Many of the participants in this survey showed an ability to be resilient during difficult times. This was a bright, educated group of young people, and even though they had difficulties with anti-Semitism at school, they still named school as one of the most important aspects in their lives. Friends and family were also essential to these adolescents, as well as their cultural heritage. The students demonstrated strong character and an ability to live successfully in two cultures. The students felt they had no recourse at school when they experienced difficult situations. The adults in charge were not serving this population of students in terms of creating a safe environment, implying that they did not feel safe at school.

The next chapter examines the limitations of the study, offers conclusions, and explores implications for future research.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

A key to Jewish adolescents' healthy development and self-confidence in such a sparsely populated area is the supportive community and family support they receive. Many of the issues that were addressed in this study are just a glimpse of what is going on in the rest of the country. The participants were very forthcoming regarding their experiences, but because they are teenagers, they were quite succinct and direct. The participants in the survey all stated that they were very proud of their Jewish culture and heritage. They all remained involved in their religion through different avenues, some with their families and others via Jewish activities such as camps or sports teams. All of the students that reported a strong pride and positive ethnic identity kept involved with their Jewish community, and all were actively participating in their cultural and religious traditions. All the teenagers participated in cultural events with their families. This family support seems to foster self-assurance and a deep pride in their ethnic identity.

All of the participants took part in a bar or bat mitzvah. Some felt this helped to teach their communities, who were not familiar with Judaism, about their culture. Many felt it helped them to become more accepted or understood at their schools. Several of their teachers and classmates attended the ceremonies to witness the ritual for the first time. This being said, it may have taken many of these students thirteen years to be understood by their classmates and teachers.
Limitations of the Research

This study had several limitations. Time was a considerable factor, as I recruited and surveyed participants during a two-month period. A broader study would be desirable for a more complete understanding of students’ experiences with ethnic identity and education. The number of participants was also a factor. More in-depth interviews may have elicited more detailed data and greater quantity of information. A case study examination also may elicit additional rich information.

Implications for Future Research

The research I have done is a preliminary start to a countywide study of Jewish students’ experiences. It would be interesting to interview local students who move away and go to college elsewhere so as to assess their experiences both within and outside of the community. It would also be beneficial to interview Jewish students’ experiences at the local university. Additionally, interviewing young people who are Jewish but are not involved or active in the Jewish community to see what their experiences are may provide yet another window into the impact of being Jewish on young people in this rural community. Exploring current anti-discrimination and Holocaust education curricula used by local schools would provide more insight into methods for mitigating prejudice and harassment for students. Surveying teachers and administrators on the training they think would be effective to deal with anti-Semitism in the schools would also be an interesting study for furthering research in this area.
Further research in this field would aid in creating programs in the schools to deal with prejudice and anti-Semitism. The literature shows that providing Holocaust education and education about anti-Semitism is one way to raise young people’s awareness of historical prejudice, injustice, and hatred. If students receive early multicultural education, it may decrease these issues in high schools. Introducing students to the Jewish culture earlier may also help to foster understanding and eliminate some of the derogatory behavior towards Jewish students in public school. Participants often did not go to the school administration for fear that they would not deal with it at all or would handle it ineffectively. It may help for educators to be required to expand the cultural sensitivity training they currently receive as part of their credential programs in order to facilitate understanding and empathy for the diverse student populations they teach. Ideas about religious and cultural differences for Jews and other marginalized groups should be added to the curriculum addressing multicultural awareness in education. Finally, it may be useful to enhance the professional development of all members of the U.S. educational system so that they can accept, understand, and welcome children and families who view the world through different lenses.
REFERENCES


Totten, S. (1998). The start is as important as the finish: Establishing a foundation for study of the Holocaust. *Social Education*, 70-76.


APPENDIX A

Student Questionnaire

PART I

1. Please provide the following information:
   Sex: Female □  Male □
   Age: _____  Grade enrolled in:_____ 

2. On a scale of 1-3 (3 = highest), how much does being Jewish matter to you?
   1……………………………….……2………………………………………..3
   Not at all  Somewhat  Very much

3. Which of the following are most important to you? Rank the following in order of importance to you from 1 to 8 with 1 being the most important.
   ___ Contributing to society
   ___ Being with family
   ___ Spending time with friends
   ___ Having a lot of money
   ___ Acknowledging my Jewish identity
   ___ Getting a good education
   ___ Having people admire me
   ___ Having fun

4. Do you identify yourself as Jewish?
   1……………………………….……2………………………………………..3
   Never  Sometimes  Always

5. Are most of your friends Jewish?
   Yes □  No □
   If not, about how many Jewish friends do you have?

6. Did you have a bat or bar mitzvah? Yes □ No □

7. What type of Jewish education did you have?
8. Are you still involved in your Jewish education? Check all that apply.
   _____Hebrew school
   _____Jewish Youth Groups
   _____Jewish summer camp
   _____Family involvement
   Other

PART II

9. Have you personally experienced anti-Semitism at your school?
   Yes ☐ No ☐
   If yes, please explain what you experienced.

10. Have you witnessed others experiencing anti-Semitism at your school?
    Yes ☐ No ☐
    If yes, please explain what you witnessed.

11. Have you observed other students using hateful language regarding race or
    religion?
    Yes ☐ No ☐
    If yes, please explain what you observed.

12. What was the response of the adults to the anti-Semitic experiences you had or
    observed at your school?

13. Regarding the anti-Semitic experiences either had or observed at your school,
    did you feel comfortable talking to an adult at school about them?
    Yes ☐ No ☐
    Please explain why you were comfortable or uncomfortable.

14. How much time have you spent learning about the Holocaust in School?
    1……………………………….……2………………………………………..3
None                    Some                    A lot

15. Have you learned about anti-Semitism in school?
Yes □ No □

16. Please use the remaining space to share any other information about your experiences being Jewish in Humboldt County schools.

*Thank you for completing this survey!*

I would be interested in participating in a focus group interview.
Yes □ No □ Maybe □