Methods of Teaching the Bible - A Study on the Learning Experience of the Millennium's Pupils from High Schools

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Abstract

Through qualitative research, data were collected using semi-structured interviews of 76 pupils ages 12-18, born between 1997-2003. The research study attempts to answer the question: what are the expectations of millennial (Generation Z) youths from Bible study classes in public schools. Results show that Israeli pupils in nonreligious public schools prefer and expect Bible studies to be conducted utilizing three teaching and learning methods:

1. Literary criticism and high-order thinking
2. Experiential manner of teaching
3. Discourse forming moral identity

The expectation of many of the participants in the research is for instruction that invites expression of opinions and critical thought through dialogue and class discussion. The pupils' expectations are contrary to traditional teaching that is focused on the content per se, which according to the research participants causes them to disassociate themselves from the subject matter. As befitting millennials in the Digital Age, the participants did not express interest in amassing content knowledge, but rather in the stimuli of experiential teaching that includes media, technology, drama, stories and games, all in contrast to the prevailing conservative teaching approaches that they claim causes them to be disinterested.

The pupils' perceptions and expectations calls for the planning and execution of teaching based on critical and high order thinking, with emotional and cognitive processing of cultural humanistic content that is relevant for molding young adults' cultural identity.

Keywords: *Humanities Instruction, Teaching Methods, Authentic Learning, Generation Z, Digital Age*

1. Introduction

Gen Z is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the generation of people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s; and in the Cambridge dictionary as "the group of people who were born in the US and Western Europe after 2001: Generation Z has been called as the 'Silent Generation' because of the time they will spend online".

People who belong to Gen Z, were born into a digital era in which cellular phones and the internet are a very central part of lifestyle. They completed 12 years of primary and secondary education in schools circa 2015. For the most part their school experience comprises a period of childhood and adolescence (which they still experience) where, as was the practice in the twentieth century and earlier, teaching focuses on transmission of content knowledge. The expectation was that pupils would retain the content knowledge, even if just in the short term until the approaching examination and practice predefined skills such as solving calculus equations and conducting a conversation in a foreign language (Harari, 2018). It would be natural to expect a revision of the school experience in a reality where pupils are, at the stroke of a key, overwhelmed by huge amounts of information often receiving countless conflicting reports impeding their ability to produce knowledge. This quandary is compounded by the increasing difficulty to predict what transformations will occur even in the near future, what professions and tasks pupils will undertake in ten to twenty years or to even define the future challenges pupils will face. Despite the transmutation of the educational landscape, today, as we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century, no such educational revision has been observed and particularly not in secondary schools: neither transformations of the school curriculums nor transitions in the teaching methods. It appears that amplified access to information and the growing sophistication of technological tools has led only to first-order change, but schools are not operating significantly or fundamentally different from what was done before.

Gen Z pupils bring different attitudes, expectations, strengths, and shortcomings into the classrooms than previous pupils. While individuals vary, of course, the prevailing belief is that, taken as a whole, these students are newsworthily different from previous generational cadres (Mazer & Hess, 2016). They has never known a world without smart phones and the Internet. They utilize social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Consequently, they are accustomed to fast changing technology, tend

to multitask and learn experientially (Hicks, Riedy, & Waltz, 2018). They primarily rely on the Internet and vid-eos (i.e., YouTube) to provide information rather than textbooks or manuals (Pew Re-search Center, 2014).

Gen Z communicate with text and images. Their listening span is short and they do not have the patience or interest to hear an abundance of complex information. They are characterized by interest in social and environmental affairs and by an aspiration for social justice and a desire to make the world a better place (Fox, 2012).

The unique characteristics of Gen Z, which are fundamentally different from previous generations, necessitate second-order changes to fulfill their educational needs. Schools, and especially teachers must change current and common teaching methods, and in particular in regard to the teaching of humanistic areas of knowledge, whose relevance to the world of Gen Z is questionable. In order to facilitate the implementation of these changes, it is necessary to voice pupils' expectations in light of their descriptions of positive and negative experiences in the classroom.

2. Methodology

This study is based on the qualitative research approach, which seeks to describe and explain complex phenomena from the perspective of subjects who themselves experience these phenomena.
The research question was: what are the expectations of millennial (Generation Z) pupils aged 12-18, regarding Bible study classes.

The data were collected during the 2015-2016 school year, through semi-structured interviews with 76 Israeli pupils, all of whom attend middle and high schools. The data analysis, based on thematic analysis and conducted in four continuous stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3. Findings

The Gen Z research participants expect Bible studies to be conducted utilizing three teaching and learning methods:
  1.1. Literary criticism and high-order thinking
  1.2. Experiential manner of teaching
  1.3. Discourse forming moral identity

1.1 Literary criticism and high-order thinking

The need for Gen Z pupils to develop high-order thinking skills (Swanzen, 2018) is reflected in the pupils' desire to initiate questions about the studied content, to examine biblical texts critically, comparing them with other texts and discussing theological questions and other relevant issues.

One of the research participants (10th grade) explains that when teachers present a biblical text and require pupils to respond by asking their questions, it stimulates thinking and generates interest in the subject studied:

"The teacher told us to look at the first verses and write questions, very interesting questions arose, it is a lesson I remember well."

Another pupil (9th grade) describes comparisons between the Bible and ancient myths literature as inspiring and best practise learning experience:

"We learned about the creation of the world and about the Babylonian myth of creation. By comparing the Bible to other myths I realized how the Bible is masterful and exceptional."

Many of the pupils spoke of expectations to discuss theological questions. For example, a discussion about the question of God's gender created a great deal of interest among pupils who continued to converse and argue with each other even during recess after the class.

The relevance of historical-political processes described in the Bible is one issue the Gen Z pupils seek to debate in class, especially when they are asked to express their opinions; i.e. in a lesson about monarchy in the Bible, what is the most desirable form of government. A eighth grade pupil says:

"We forgot that it was a Bible lesson. We talked about the role of a king, what it is like to be the first king and what is preferable if only the king decides or a democracy like in Israel. "

1.2 Experiential manner of teaching

The need of Gen Z for experiential learning is expressed by the pupils in their expectations to learn through demonstration and inspiring examples, active learning through creative personal expression and visual presentation of content (YouTube, images, animation).

A 12th grade pupil relished in the enactment by a teacher of a Bibilical text:

"The lessons with this teacher were the most fun. She taught by acting, she read the text in funny voices and sometimes asked the pupils to come and playact roles, no one sleeps in her classes and we all laugh hysterically."

The expectation of active learning and different creative artisitc forms are described in by a pupil (9th grade) who says:

"All the most creative things I did were in Bible lessons. I drew King Saul, next to him are three donkeys and Samuel off to the side. I think that thanks to this activity it is engraved in my memory... I think techers should continue to combine art with the other subjects, it really facilitates learning."

Another example of teaching by demonstration and guiding pupils on to identify with personalities is described by a pupil in eighth grade:

"I remember being in elementary school, going to David Ben-Gurion's house and then being told that he really loved the Bible and said that it was the only book that talks about everything, war, love, miracles, everything in one book."

1.3 Discourse forming moral identity

Gen Z's yearning for social justice is evident in their expectations that Bible studies will assist them in shaping their moral identity that is relevant to their lives and in the perception of the Bible as a book that teaches morals. The pupils state:

"In the Bible classes there are things we can identify with. There are a lot of lessons that after i left made me think about other experiences I had, but with the same moral, and sometimes it made me think twice about things I do."

"Laws are the subject I loved most, there is something extremely ethical about the laws written in the Bible. They are true social laws that help the weak."

A summary of the expectations of Gen Z regarding appropriate teaching methods is expressed by a high school senior pupil who mentions performing critical thinking tasks, active learning experiences that include collaborative learning and learining by preparing PowerPoint presentations:

"Our group prepared a presentation about morality and philosophy in the Bible stories which we shared with the class about what we learned and researched... We spoke about the prophet Jeremiah who tried to warn the people of Israel that the way they were behaving was immoral which led to a discussion about what is moral and what is not."

4. Discussion

In light of the above in era where generational spans decreased to 5-10 years, clearly we are at the outset of a second order change in the education system, including teacher training.

The cognitive patterns and cognitive skills of students will be among the most significant factors that will change the goals of education, the curriculum, the role of teachers, and the role of students in teaching and learning processes. To the extent that one can predict the future and given the trends in other aspects of life, we can assume a transition in the direction of individualized teaching and learning is likely.

When it comes to teaching the humanities and subjects dealing with cultural content, many questions arise as to how to accomplish meaningful teaching other than copious reading and writing.

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