



## **Beyond Flipping Out: Experiences of Year-in-Israel Programs**

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### **Surprisingly Diverse Religious Backgrounds of Student Population**

As professional teachers, we pride ourselves on our awareness of differences in student learning styles. We cater our lesson plans to utilize differentiation, multi-sensory approaches and similar techniques. We are cognizant of the fact that our students possess varied learning styles, and enter our classes with different degrees of prior topical understanding. However, many of us would be surprised to discover just how varied our student populations are with regard to their religious backgrounds. This fact surprised us as well. No question on our interview questionnaire directly addressed this issue. **Yet, of the 14 randomly selected students in our study, at least 7 of them described having come from “non-standard” religious and/or schooling backgrounds.** Many of those students had, either as an individual or as a family, undergone significant religious transformations prior to their year of study in Israel. At least 3 of the students come from family backgrounds that would be regularly termed “ba’alei teshuva”. Another student gradually came to religious observance on his own, beginning during middle school years. A few additional students reported having attended smaller schools outside of the major Jewish centers or having switched schools one or more times over their schooling career. One student did both. He had switched schools numerous times, sometimes due to dissatisfaction with the institution he had been attending and at other times due to his family’s relocation. Eventually, he finished high school boarding at a small school. Another student switched to a

junior college after his sophomore year of high school, since high school was not working out for him.

It would be worthwhile for teachers, of middle school, high school, or post-high school students to take into consideration the possibility – and even the probability – that some of the students in the class might not share the “standard” religious background with their peers. One would hope that administrations of Israel one-year programs are already aware of the facts that were mentioned by students in our interviews. Some students said they just recently began keeping kosher. Another could barely read Hebrew.

These types of facts should influence both lesson-plan design, as well as the attempts by a teacher to develop meaningful relationships with his students beyond the class sessions. Extra sensitivity should also be employed to avoid the risk of offending students who come from “non-standard” family or religious backgrounds. Though these are the ABCs of human relations, we might not have stopped to think, for example, that the mitzvah of “v’ahavtem et hageir” or that of “ona’at devarim” would be at play in a classroom lesson or discussion.

One possible positive side-effect of this phenomenon is that at least two students cited “ba’al teshuva” peers as positive influences on their own religious attitudes and practices. In addition, students who are emerging from non-standard backgrounds might possess a certain internal strength of character due to their having overcome challenges. Rather than viewing this phenomenon merely as an additional burden of which to keep track, we can also utilize it to remind ourselves of the need to harness each student’s individual strengths.