



# HOMESCHOOLING IN THE COMMUNITY. AN ANALYSIS OF LIMMUD CENTER'S PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS

Summary report

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## Summary

The analysis of the Limmud Centre's learning plan for the boys who attend the Centre and the portfolios of their work compiled during the year forms part of a much larger study known as: Homeschooling in the Community. This study was led by Sivane Hirsch and Valerie Amiraux and was done in partnership with the Centre and in collaboration with its director. It aimed to document the implementation of an innovative educational and social approach in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Montréal. The study explored different aspects of this initiative by 1) taking an inventory of the Centre's innovative pedagogical approaches and practices and analyzing their effect on the students (Education) 2) a mapping of parents' motives for sending their sons to the Centre and those of the staff for working there, especially given the social challenges arising from having made that choice (Sociology). Thus, this report addresses the first objective of the study, that of analyzing the pedagogical tools developed by the Centre and their capacity to support teaching, in order that the education offered to the boys be *available, accessible, adapted* and *socially acceptable* to this particular Hasidic community and to Québec's society at large.

Our analysis shows not only was this Centre successful in providing the boys with a satisfactory level of education that met the criteria for the homeschooling, but that it also allowed them to accomplish the objectives of the standardized education curriculum, and this, for each of the required competencies. Thus, the recommendations are mainly aimed at external observers (trainers, evaluators) to help them report on whether the end of school year pedagogical objectives were attained.

The success of the Limmud Centre in making education available, accessible and adapted to the needs of Hasidic boys through an educational model adapted to their requirements invites a reappraisal of the alternative pedagogical approaches which, by adapting to student needs, can provide for more effective learning. Further, this approach to homeschooling confirms the possibility that an adequate level of education for Hasidic boys can be provided, even while respecting their choice to pursue a religious education at school.



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## INTRODUCTION

In Montréal, as in many other cities where they have settled, the Hasidic Jewish community lives in the heart of the city, adopting a segregated way of life that distances itself from any influence of the outside world on its members (Tavory, 2016). The school within these communities is seen as the ideal place for socialization and for the cultural and religious transmission of a particular lifestyle (Hirsch, 2019). To this end, the schools are segregated, boys from girls, and have different objectives. Once their schooling is completed, girls are expected to become homemakers, though some do go out to work to ensure a minimal level of income. In the case of boys, their education prepares them to assume the spiritual leadership of the family and the community. In accordance with this logic, girls have access to a general instruction of quality in schools in the Hasidic community and may even pursue vocational training at college and university. In contrast, the education of boys is almost strictly limited to a program of religious teaching (Hirsch et al., 2016). The purpose of the Hasidic schools is to reinforce the boundaries between the communities – different Hasidic communities, other Jewish communities or other Quebecers – and their immediate context, to ensure their own community's survival. This explains why the Hasidic community has opposed any attempt to force them, notably by legal means, to offer even minimal secular instruction to their boys (Perry-Hazan, 2015). However, they are not so much opposed to the integration of secular content into the programs of study, as they are to the time needed for this secular curriculum and it taking precedence over religious instruction (Barak-Corren, 2017; Katzir & Perry-Hazan, 2018).

The Hasidic schools' refusal to follow the Québec Education Program (QEP) has long been at the heart of a legal battle (Hirsch et al., 2016). The schools are considered as "illegal" in Québec because they have not taught the 25-hour weekly curriculum in any of different subject areas. However, it is important not to conflate the Hasidic education system with the private Jewish schools (Hirsch & Amiriaux, 2016), whose objective is to reinforce the identity of a Montréal Jewish community, while pursuing excellence in the teaching of a secular curriculum. In September 2017, a new modification to the Education Act opened the door to Hasidic families which allowed them



to comply with the compulsory schooling requirements for their boys through homeschooling and, thus, guarantee their legal status<sup>1</sup>.

Currently, contextual variables are at play. The impoverishment of families and the low academic success rate of boys who try all the same to enter the job market (rather than pursuing Talmudic studies in the Yeshivas) (Schnoor, 2002) are the two factors that have led several families from these Hasidic communities to attach more value to the general instruction of their boys, thereby increasing their chances of success in life (Pfeffer, 2017). This evolution – it is not a revolution, contrary to what we often think - is the result of ongoing and gradual changes, which are often related to the necessity of adapting to a modern lifestyle, while still participating in the life of the community (Caplan, 2007). This presents a serious challenge for both the members of the community in question and for the social players that interact with them, since it involves recognizing these changes, measuring their impact, and suggesting ways to support them. The issue is not limited to content issues alone. Other problems frequently arise that relate to the way of life of these often large Hasidic families who have few economic means at their disposal (Brown, 2017; Shahar, 2014). A study on the implementation of an early childhood service in the heart of Montréal’s Hasidic community revealed that Hasidic parents seldom engaged in activities with their children, such as reading, games or other leisure pursuits. This absence of engagement was considered to be linked to the lack of time or want of adequate skills on the part of parents, difficulties that only came to light when it came to using the pedagogical resources provided (Willms, 2010) .

By homeschooling, defined as “the supervision by parents, or by persons mandated by them, of their children’s learning, without full-time attendance at a teaching institution” [translation] (Brabant, 2013), any future conflicts regarding the primacy of religious teaching are avoided. In effect, it facilitates its acceptance at the level of the community. Nonetheless, it poses a considerable challenge for parents who are responsible for the quality of instruction. Parents who homeschool most often give the following four reasons for their choice: 1) they wish to engage in a family project, 2) they are dissatisfied with the social and educational organization of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Education Act, art.15.

schools, 3) they wish to offer their children an enriched curriculum, and 4) their concern for the children's socioemotional development. These parents try to distance themselves as much as possible from the typical school model, which they feel limits their child's natural curiosity and, consequently, stifles their will to learn. (Brabant, *Ibid*). In the context being studied here, the parents in the Hasidic community still face the same challenges mentioned above – lack of time and skills – and these are transposed into this new reality. Thus, the implementation of a new pedagogical approach, such as the one offered at the Limmud Centre in Montréal, cannot be properly understood without a nuanced analysis of not only the social issues that arise at the level of the community, but also of the educational challenges faced by the Centre itself.

Among these challenges, the two most important ones must be mentioned straightaway. The first is the amount of time allocated to teaching in the Centre: the children arrive at the Centre after a day of instruction at their religious school and have only an hour devoted to learning the curriculum. Nevertheless, the Centre aims to teach the entire QEP as required, not only to keep the boys' prospects open and ensure them an "open future" (Feinberg, 1980), but also to gain social and political acceptance for an approach that uncompromisingly articulates the requirements of a religious life with those of life in contemporary society. To overcome this second challenge, the byword is "efficacy", a notion often considered at odds with the objectives of alternative pedagogies that specifically aspire to "break with traditional teaching by proposing the active involvement of the student and choosing activities that take into account their motivation [...]and their interests." [translation] (Vienneau, 2011, p. 220).

In the interest of gaining a better understanding of the approach adopted by the Limmud Centre, the project "Homeschooling in the community" has been following the work of the Centre since September 2018. In order to respect the delicate role played by the Centre within the Hassidic community, a qualitative inquiry method, inspired by ethnographic approaches found in sociology (Cefaï et al., 2012), was adapted. Apart from on-site observations and interviews with all the stakeholders involved in this educational project (notably the Centre's director, staff and parents) about this novel experience, different types of activities (learning, lesson preparation by teachers, sporting) were studied.

This report essentially summarizes the results of a systematic analysis of the pedagogical approaches used by the Centre. Firstly, it focuses on the development of the curriculum by the director and her teaching staff, then on the tools they prepared to make the curriculum not only adaptable, accessible and available, but also socially acceptable. According to UNESCO, these four conditions are fundamental to ensuring children's rights to education. Particular attention has been paid to the use of the portfolio as an evaluation tool, with a view to assessing whether the Centre's program meets the government's educational criteria for homeschooled children.

This report begins with a description of the curriculum offered by the Limmud Centre. A comparison will then be made between this curriculum and the ministerial requirements for homeschooling. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of the students' portfolios to identify the strengths of these tools and the challenges they present when used in a context of mixed homeschooling in the community.

# 1. LEARNING PROJET

## 1.1 Overview of the learning project

The goal of Limmud Centre is to ensure that Hasidic boys meet the compulsory education requirements of the MEES. To attain this objective, the boys must cover a lot of learning in a very short amount of time, as they only come to the Centre for four hours a week. The Centre is not endorsed by the rabbinical authorities. Whereas such an endorsement would guarantee the attendance of all the boys in the community, it would also entail a power relationship with the rabbis who would wish to impose certain rules and practices. By not asking for this official recognition, the Centre is free to define its own syllabus in line with the educational requirements and the challenges of attaining them.

At the time of our analysis (2018-2020), the Centre welcomed groups ranging in age from 6 (Grade 1) to 14 years old (Secondary II). Consequently, the Centre's learning project was comprised of seven learning plans, one for each of the seven groups of students ranging from the first to the eighth year of schooling (from elementary Grade 1 to Secondary II). For the 2018-2019 school year, there were no children in Secondary I.

The learning plans, inspired by the province of Ontario's<sup>2</sup> educational curriculum, respected the QEP. The learning was progressive, becoming more and more complex as the children advanced in their schooling. Even so, this did not prevent the Centre from offering support tailored to the specific needs of each child.

On the whole, the seven learning plans followed the model provided by the ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur. Organised in exactly the same way, there are six sections:

1. The first section provides information on the child such as his first name, his family name and his postal address. This information was to be filled out by each parent before sending their boy's learning plan.

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<sup>2</sup> When asked by the researchers, the staff at the Limmud Centre explained that the curriculum is easier to adapt for untrained educators as it does not use professional jargon (especially that linked to competencies) and that the end of term outcomes are more explicit.

2. The second section describes the educational approaches used to encourage the child to fulfil the learning requirements shown on the plan.
3. The third section identifies the methods used to evaluate the child's learning.
4. The fourth section indicates the estimated time needed for the child to fulfil the learning requirements shown on the plan.
5. The fifth section lists those organizations that are available to support the child in their learning process.
6. Finally, it is the sixth and last section that presents what the child must learn. The subject areas to be covered are tabulated, along with the competencies to be developed, the knowledge to be acquired and the material that will be used.

## 1.2. Analysis of the learning plans

The seven learning plans<sup>3</sup> were analysed against the learning project templates provided by the ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur du Québec (MEES) (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) and the Québec Association for Home-Based Education's Suggestion Guide for Parent-Educators in Québec: suggestions to fulfill the legal requirements (AQED, 2018). There is a great deal of coherence between the plans and information can be recorded for all levels offered. Basically, the lessons follow on one from the other, without being too restrictive, and cover all subject areas.

The analysis of the plans showed evidence of collaboration with the *Direction d'éducation à la maison* (DEM) of the MEES, since several elements on the plan that DEM professionals had deemed as irrelevant in the first year, were added to their plan the following year. This explains why the order of the sections in the Centre's plans differ from those in the MEES template and generally contain less information. Likewise, very little information is included on the pedagogical approach (for example, teaching methods, teaching practices), the evaluation methods and the projected teaching time. It is easy to understand the importance of this data as each child's progress can then be followed even though they are learning in a group situation. Notwithstanding the Hasidic boys' appearance and attendance at the same religious school in

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<sup>3</sup> An example of an analysis can be found in the Annex.

their community, their academic backgrounds are actually less homogenous than we might think. Some of them may have already attended “recognized” schools, and, thus, have a permanent code and, therefore, could have responded to some of the questions that were omitted.

The children’s lessons are more thematic than competency based. The example given from the Ontario program could explain this difference in approach. Moreover, a considerable - if not onerous - amount of knowledge is required to be learned, especially given the homeschooling context. Indeed, one can question the ability of the children to achieve these goals. This is true not only for Mathematics, for example, where each and every aspect is included in the plan, but also for social studies where the objectives are much vaguer and only a few details are included in the column for materials. Along with presenting the material actually used, it would also be helpful to give further examples of materials or examples of activities that the child will do to develop the competencies and acquire the knowledge indicated.

The learning plans attest to the comprehensive nature of the teachings provided by the Centre and show that the progression of learning between the different levels of schooling is respected. The plans also demonstrate that it is possible to cover all the required components of the curriculum with the Hasidic boys, whose focus is essentially on the religious life (Perry-Hazan, 2015). Whether it be in sciences, history or English, the children follow the QEP without too much difficulty. Nevertheless, how these themes are presented in the portfolios and in tutorial groups will determine to what degree these will lessons are acceptable in the eyes of their families.

### 1.3 Some avenues for further reflection on the learning project

Considering the use that the Centre makes of the personal portfolio, the learning plans play a smaller role in monitoring the child’s progress. Therefore, if some sections were more detailed, they would provide better information to those following the progress of the child. To improve the presentation of the learning plans, two avenues could be explored:

1. Recognize each child’s individuality by inserting a section in the plans that would include the child’s interests, strengths and his particular needs;
2. Present the competencies rather than the themes in order to develop these first (see specific examples in the Annex).

It is important to point out that these avenues are actually followed in practice. The learning plans are adapted to each child's needs and the portfolios show which competencies are developed through the year. It is, therefore, just a question of adapting the language used in the plans to the Centre's educational approach: boys working in small groups, competency development through the educational framework of interdisciplinary projects, and taking advantage of the adaptation of learning to meet specific needs.

## 2. LEARNING AT THE CENTRE

We have been studying the Centre since 2018. In addition to the detailed analysis of the curriculum and portfolio evaluation presented here, observations were made in the Centre and interviews carried out with the teaching staff, their assistants, the administration and the parents. The analysis of these interviews will be presented elsewhere.

Here, we describe the Centre and the way in which the boys learned. We had the chance of visiting the Centre on several occasions to observe different kinds of activities (learning, lesson preparation by the teachers, sports). Given the regularity of our visits to the Centre, we were able to develop a relationship of trust with the members of the staff who, for the most part, belong to a religious community that keeps to itself and considers non-Hasidics as outsiders. (Becker, 1985 [1963]). We were able to work collaboratively with the director (Desgagné, 1997), which ensured that our findings from this unique project were relevant and reliable.

The Centre welcomes the boys five days a week (Sunday to Thursday) from 3:15 pm to 4:15 pm (the younger boys) and from 4:30 pm to 5:30 pm (the older boys). These times are adapted to fit in with their regular school schedule, as during the day all the boys attend the community's religious school, the yeshiva. To be able to get to the Limmud Centre on time, the children must leave their yeshiva before the end of the school day. Their teachers and the administration are aware of this and, without actually giving it their official approval, accept it. It is worth noting that, since December 2019, after being forced to collaborate with the MEES, the yeshiva offers a homeschooling program that is said to support homeschooling.

The children start to arrive in dribs and drabs as of 3 pm. They come in and ask what they are supposed to do while waiting for the group work to start. They are each greeted personally, asked about their day (How was your day?), but also, when pertinent, about their family (Did your sister have her baby? How's your grandmother?). In fact, everyone knows everyone else and each family's news travels quickly. Gradually, the children move into their groups (8 to 10 boys per age group) and by 3:15 pm "school" work starts. Each day is given over to a different activity. Even though it is late in the day, the children are generally enthusiastic and motivated: they participate in the course and interact comfortably with the teachers. The teachers are of all ages: university



students, students attending the *seminary* (a college-level educational institution for Hasidic girls), retired teachers and teachers who have agreed to give a little time to the Centre to help them get up and running.

The physical arrangements vary depending on which theme is being taught. For Mathematics, the boys sit around a large table placed in front of a blackboard and listen to the teacher. For the English class, they are seated on a carpet with a snack and are told a story before doing some related written work. Visual arts and science projects are organized in the large entrance hallway to give everyone the space needed to work and get messy. Lastly, the boys get together every Monday outside the Centre for a physical activity: hockey in the winter and baseball in the summer. They are coached by young athletes from Concordia University's sporting team, the Concordia Stingers, who do this as part of their community engagement program.

All the learning and socialization activities (essentially the sporting activities) clearly meet the requirements of the QEP. Contrary to what one might have assumed about certain themes being taught in this milieu, notably science, there were no objections from parents during our observation period. When asked, the director had made it clear that all the themes would be taught. So, it is the way in which they are taught that makes them acceptable to the parents. Consequently, science instruction aims to give the boys a better understanding of the divine creation and is not used to prove that God does not exist. Other themes, such as those found in literature could be problematic, as "imaginary" texts are not read by Hasidics. Once again, the subject requirements are met by having the boys use a different type of learning material, such as biographical and historical texts.

These situations demonstrate how well this Centre is integrated into its community and with society at large, and the care the administration takes to offer "conventional" school activities that are rarely accessible to these particular school age boys. In fact, even though the artistic and sporting activities are considered as unimportant and are difficult to organize in their community<sup>4</sup>, they are those that are greatly appreciated by Québec's society. One of the administration's

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<sup>4</sup> Considering the number of children per family and their obligation to lead a very pious religious life, engaging in artistic activities that create a mess in the home, as well as participating in sporting activities outside of the home, presents too big of a challenge for many of the families.

stated objectives is to make these activities accessible to these boys and acceptable to their families. And, the families of these young boys – mothers and children, and also some fathers -, appear happy and proud, as they sit in the stands of the arena during hockey practice, to support them in this learning endeavour.

Over the years since the Centre opened, the number of these kinds of activities has increased. Even though the government changed the basic requirements for homeschoolers, the center's administration did not have to make any adjustments in order to meet the needs of the boys and their families, or to respond to Ministry requirements and to educational issues, if not tensions, that surface in the community. Without going into a detailed description of these internal disputes, it must be remembered that certain members of the Hasidic community do not believe that boys should follow a secular curriculum and that the educational focus should be on sacred teachings alone (*limoudei kodesh*). The Center, on the contrary, stayed focused on its sole goal, the children's education, and followed the specific requirements of a standardized education curriculum rather than the stipulations for homeschooling.

Given the many challenges that arise, the boy's involvement in these activities and their parents' motivation for sending them to the Centre must be considered. In the next section, the quality of learning will be assessed through an analysis of the portfolio as a tool for learning and evaluation.

## 3. EVALUATION PROJET

### 3.1. Overall presentation of the evaluation project

The Limmud Centre's evaluation project analysed by the research team consists of individual portfolios organized into school years and tailored to the particular needs of the children. The children's learning progression can be observed over the different complex projects and learning modules that each boy completes. The portfolios constitute the tools for recording different data that can be used by the teacher to make a professional judgement (Bélair & Van Nieuwenhoven, 2010) about whether a child has succeeded or not in either a course or in the school year (MEQ, 2001). They can also be used for keeping samples of the learner's work, progress and accomplishments (Barrett, 2001), used as an interactive communication tool between the teacher and the learner and as logbooks that permit a broader vision of the student's competency development over the short and long term (Jalbert, 1997). Thus, the portfolio can be used as a summative evaluation tool that enables an overall judgement of the student's progress to be made. There are many types of portfolios (MEQ, 2001):

- The learning portfolio for formative assessment purposes provides feedback to the child on their successes and where they need to make improvements;
- The evaluation portfolio is used to keep most of the student's work, exams and productions, so that they can be used to gauge his level of success in the acquisition of the different subject competencies;
- The presentation portfolio is where the child keeps his best pieces of work and explains why he has chosen them. This is a self-regulation strategy that helps the child to develop a sense of pride in his own accomplishments (Jalbert, 1997).

The portfolios analysed by the research team included a variety of evaluation methods that were used to assess knowledge or competency acquisition and that were adapted according to the simplicity or complexity of a task to be completed by the student. Among these were:

- Corrected exams with comments that tested knowledge acquisition and summaries of the subject learning modules were regularly kept in the portfolio. However, it was mostly end of module exams targeting specific knowledge in mathematics and science that were included.

For example, an exam on pressure, temperature and volume, required the student to explain his answers for three of the questions, such as: When pressure is increased, what happens to liquids and gases? Explain how pressure affects the volume of liquid or gas”?

- The results obtained from online language exercises for French second language are printed out in summary form.
- The thematic interdisciplinary projects, that included the different steps required to complete them, as well as assessments of knowledge and know-how, such as writing an autobiography or doing a project on natural gas and its importance as an energy source in Canada. For instance, this last project integrated aspects of Geography, Science and English. All subject areas were studied and explored throughout the project.
- Chapters from the subject textbooks that were entirely or partially integrated into lessons, particularly English, mathematics and science.
- Collections of work completed by the students themselves, such as crafts, leaflets or promotions, often relating to course requirements in subjects like English or science, for example.

There were various types of evaluation tools, built and often personalized to meet the teachers’ expectations and the specific needs of the students. These many examples of formative and summative assessments were not organized in relation to the competencies to be evaluated or by subject areas. Rather, the personal portfolios of each child attending the Centre were arranged chronologically to allow for their individual learning progress to be observed.

Therefore, the teachers’ evaluations target subject knowledge, as much as they do subject competencies, cross-curricular competencies, work strategies and written work or even behaviours. Throughout the completed work can be found theory exams, summaries of modules and evaluated projects, and summative and formative evaluation tools, such as:

- Descriptive criterion-referenced evaluation grids; for example, a four-level grid was created to evaluate the writing of an autobiography (see Annex 2)
- Check lists; for example, an evaluation sheet for an opinion text included seven (7) success criteria that were rated and explained:

*(1) Cover sheet – includes your name, the due date & the opinion questions / (2) Introduces the topic and gives clear opinion / (3) Each paragraph contains a relevant reason and evidence to support the claim. / (4) Formal style / (5) Paper is organized and logical. / (6) Conclusion follows the argument. / (7) Grammar and Mechanics.*

- Feedback comments in the margins, which directly addressed the student; for example, at the very end of a descriptive text can be read: “Bravo! It’s clear you worked hard! Your information is interesting and organized!”. And, in the margin of a science problem where the student had to give a formula to calculate a ratio of mass (g) by volume of liquid (ml), it can be read: State “of what”. E.g: “mass of fluid”.
- Comments on completed work and essays that gave feedback directly to the student; for example, the evaluation grid for an opinion text contained several notes intended for the student: “In the 4th paragraph, you just list reasons. (...) The 4th paragraph doesn’t follow a logical sequence. (...) More details are needed. (...) Your conclusion needs work. I gave you ideas in your rough.”

### 3.2. Analysis of the portfolios as an evaluation tool

An analysis of the children’s portfolios, which used indicators from an evaluation process in the regulatory context suggested by Bélair et Nieuwenhoven (2010), examined the relevance, scope and coherence of marks, comments and feedback, as well as the criterion-referenced evaluation grids showing the learning objectives targeted by the various completed works. As there was no distinction made between formative and summative assessments in the portfolio, the analysis considered them as formative. Thus, an evaluation of what the children had learned could still be done without needing to qualify it.

The portfolio analysis, the observations carried out in the Centre during the 2018-2019 school year and the examination of the learning projects demonstrated that the use of the portfolio is, in general, the appropriate tool for the learning plan offered by the Centre. Furthermore, these analyses show that, even though the different projects often demand higher expectations than those of the Ministry in subject areas of the same level (e.g.: to use diverse complex problem solving strategies as of Elementary Cycle 1, briefly show an understanding of a natural phenomenon at Elementary Cycle 2 or write an argumentative text of 600 to 800 words in Grade

8/Secondary II), the portfolios examined showed that the children successfully met these expectations. This outcome is particularly notable for English, a subject area that mainly uses project-based learning and where progress is regularly assessed to give the child support when needed.

Criterion referenced evaluation grids, i.e. the evaluation grids without numerical ratings that focus on the learning process rather than the student's performance (Guyomar et al., 2015), were regularly used as assessment tools. These grids, designed to monitor the progress of the student rather than rate his performance on a task, gave an accurate and well-defined description of expected outcomes. Moreover, they usually included a space for feedback, which helped to track the strengths and individual needs of each child in a given task.

Despite this tool, the evaluations examined in the portfolios did not show the scope nor the wealth of what had been learned. This could be improved by including not only work and evaluation findings, but also more varied and descriptive reflections on the competencies developed or that were in the process of being developed. The evaluations could, for example, specifically include the elements assessed during projects to bring attention to the common thread running through them. Furthermore, even though the projects are mostly interdisciplinary, it would be helpful to list each of the competencies for each subject. This would make it easier for an external evaluator to read and recognize the different elements and learning objectives and to be able to make specific comments. Thus, the portfolio would present a complete profile of the learner that could be used not only to support learning, but also to evaluate overall achievement.

Finally, the portfolio is a remarkable evaluation tool as the children themselves can regularly add personal reflections about their own work, their final projects or their evaluations. Moreover, if notes recording conversations held between children and teachers were included, this would attest to the children's level of engagement and to the connections they were making between their previous, current and future learning. Many of the potential strengths of the portfolio have yet to be explored by the Centre's staff. So, whereas the portfolios provide an objective picture of what has been learned, they do not reveal the kinds of difficulties experienced by each of the students, which is generally what a portfolio is supposed to do.

### 3.3 Some suggestions to improve the use of portfolios as an evaluation tool

A major strength of this particular evaluation project is that it is individualized and can be adapted to fit the needs, learning pace and profile of each child attending the Centre. The portfolio is a viable evaluation tool for this approach, but there are some things that could be further investigated to improve support for each child's learning project<sup>5</sup>.

Firstly, the portfolio is currently not used as a tool to promote interactive communication between the various stakeholders involved in the children's education. Numerical and criterion-referenced marks are recorded in chronological order and give evidence of the child's achievements and difficulties, but the comments, which are sometimes fairly succinct and rarely consistent from one task to another, demonstrate little of the child's implication in the evaluative process. In addition, several criterion-referenced evaluation grids combine the outcomes for know-how and behaviours, and this does not always accurately reflect the competencies developed by the child.

The analysis identifies several avenues for improvement. Firstly, given the potential of interactive communications with the parents, it would be worth considering:

1. Creating a space in the portfolio where not only teachers can give their feedback on the tasks accomplished during the projects, but also where children can add in their own reflections on what they have learned and the difficulties they have experienced along the way. Apart from assessments of targeted subject competencies, this space could be further used to spark exchanges on strategies, learning behaviours and cross-curricular competencies.
2. Keeping regular notes on conversations with the children. For example, writing an interim report that involves them in reviewing what progress has been made and what needs to be improved for future projects. Without putting into question all the methods and tools used to evaluate the child, this addition will ensure that a common thread runs through the portfolio, making it easier to read in the long term.

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the analysis of the portfolios did not reveal how much support was given orally, as there is no written record. Consequently, it is likely that the areas for improvement suggested by the research team have already been integrated by the teachers at the Centre.

Next, for more standardized evaluations, it might be helpful to:

- 1- Provide a template that records evaluation marks for all subjects (Linn & Gronlund, 2000).  
This would be based on what the teachers want to record in the portfolio.
- 2- Evaluate, separately where possible as much of the work is interdisciplinary, the competencies targeted for each of the subject areas. This will make it easier to view the children's progress in the development of their subject competencies over a longer time period and justify the overall appraisal of the children's achievement.



## CONCLUSION

Over the last two years, we have developed an extraordinary and delicate collaboration with the director of the Limmud Centre. The Centre operates in a context that is somewhat precarious, as they do not have the official sanction of the rabbinical authorities who lead the community. The director inherently recognized the importance of documenting this unique initiative through research and not only granted us access to this world, but also shared a wealth of information with us. Without this cooperation, this exceptional study, that delves into a complex reality, could not have been carried out. Consequently, we were able to study several current research paradigms in three different domains: 1) homeschooling, 2) alternative pedagogies, and 3) the study of religious “sectarian” communities and their openness to change. The focus of this particular report was the organization of homeschooling through an alternative pedagogical approach.

As previously mentioned, the Centre offers a model of homeschooling that clearly breaks from the alternative pedagogical approaches that generally inspire “parent educators”. In effect, the Centre uses so-called “alternative” practices, such as the portfolio and the thematic approach, as this gives them the latitude to teach English, mathematics, science and “social studies” (the equivalent of Social World in Ontario) in only five hours per week (one hour a day, five times a week). Our analysis of the learning plans and portfolios demonstrated that this objective was achieved and sometimes, when the children’s attainments corresponded to the next level of schooling, even exceeded. The Centre’s learning plans, although not presented in terms of competencies, were well-adapted to the lessons analysed in the portfolios and that were observed in the learning situations. The themes covered in these plans respected the homeschooling requirements of MEES and the QEP as a whole. It is thus clear that the Hasidic boys are able to follow this program and its diverse contents without too much difficulty. It really is a question of adapting the teaching in a way that does not offend the sensibilities of the community.

Likewise, our analysis of the curriculum and the portfolios well describe the Centre’s response to the four conditions recognized by UNESCO as fundamental to the educational rights of children. In effect, the Centre makes education: adaptable – by adapting the content so that it covers all

the themes included in the QEP; accessible – by offering education within a setting that enables the children to benefit from it; available – without any limits; and, perhaps the least evident, socially acceptable at the level of the community and for the larger society in which that community lives.

In so doing, the Centre provides a different view of education in general and of homeschooling in particular. Here, the expression of different lifestyles and world visions and, moreover, the parents' right to choose their child's education and the educational rights of the child are respected.

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## Annex: Analysis of the Learning Plan (Grade 1)

Before presenting the analysis of the learning plan, here are some general remarks:

The recommendations found in this document are based on the reading of Québec’s official documents regarding homeschooling and from Québec websites that provide resources to parents wanting to homeschool their children.

1. The learning project must be submitted to the Ministry by the child’s parents. Thus, the purpose of the learning plan is to guide or accompany parents in the preparation of this dossier.
2. The first five sections should be no longer than two pages and contain specific but complete information.

Learning Plan – Grade 1	Proposed ADDITIONS
1. NAME	
<p>Child’s name, address, date of birth;</p> <p>The last level of instruction completed by the child in an educational institution/or mention if the child has never attended an educational institution;</p> <p>The name the educational institution(s) attended by the child and his permanent code, if applicable.</p>	<p>This information is to be filled by the parent before sending the learning plan</p>
2. Description of The educationAL approach	
<p>My son will learn through project-based learning, workbooks, worksheets and customized units created by the Limmud Centre to simultaneously cover multiple competencies. Our topics and progression of learning are based on the Ontario Curriculum and will include French.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. that the child will learn through a variety of stimulating methods targeting the development of competencies and the acquisition of knowledge. Include examples as before;</li> <li>2. that the methods are based on different learning theories, such as behaviourism and constructivism;</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>that the list of methods provided is not exhaustive and can vary according to the needs of the child.</li> </ol>
3. evaluation methods	
All of my son's work is saved throughout the year so that we can submit a completed portfolio for academic evaluation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>that a written status report on the implementation of the learning project will be submitted to the Ministry between the third and fifth month following its implementation;</li> <li>that a written status report of the implementation of the learning project will be submitted to the Ministry no later than June 15 following its implementation;</li> <li>that the evaluation method chosen to assess the child's learning progress is the paper portfolio;</li> <li>what will be included the portfolio;</li> <li>that the portfolio will be submitted along with the status report on the implementation of the learning project no later than June 15 following its implementation.</li> </ol>
4. Approximate plan of time to be allocated to learning activities	
This project is based on continuous learning and there is no projected time limit. It covers the period from September 2018 to June 2019.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>that the indicated time period takes into account that the project must be implemented before September 30;</li> <li>that the indicated time period takes into account that the status report and the portfolio must be submitted to the Ministry no later than June 15.</li> </ol>
5. Organization that will contribute to the child's learning	
Our family receives support from Limmud Centre (5120 De Courtrai Suite 200 – Executive Director – Devorah Feldman (514-951-8849)).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the full address of the Limmud Centre;</li> <li>that the Limmud Centre will be closely involved with the child's learning;</li> <li>the level of involvement in the child's learning by the Limmud Centre.</li> </ol>

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBJECTS, COMPETENCIES AND KNOWLEDGE TARGETED FOR GRADE 1 AS WELL AS THE ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES USED

Following the presentation of the student, the learning plan should list the competencies to be developed by the child. Note that in the plans that were analyzed, there were no section headings.

The analysis gives rise to some general comments:

1. In the first column of the table, the competencies to be developed must be described. Given the large number of competencies identified, it is clear that this is a very ambitious learning plan. Note that several elements (highlighted in yellow) appear to be themes rather than competencies to be developed.
2. The second column presents the specific expectations for the end of Grade 1. As with the list of competencies to be developed, these seem to be quite ambitious. In effect, certain elements (highlighted in yellow) could be more detailed and could include examples of what will be learned. Moreover, given the year is divided into 5 levels, the learning outcomes for each level should be specified.
3. More specifically, it would be better to organize the content into themes by order (elements in blue) and by specifying the level (elements in pink), for instance giving an exact timeframe. Certain of the elements (in green) seem to be too advanced for Grade 1.
4. In addition to the resources listed, it might be pertinent to give examples of the types of activities for each subject area. The elements highlighted in yellow could be more detailed by adding examples of what will be done.
5. The document concludes by noting that the plan does not take into account all the work done in the Centre. A broader explanation might be relevant here.

SUBJECT	COMPETENCY	SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS – BY THE END OF GRADE 1	TOOLS THAT WILL BE USED
FRENCH (2 <sup>ND</sup> LANGUAGE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Speaking</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete level 1 or 5</li> </ul>	Rosetta Stone Homeschooling Edition
ENGLISH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral communication</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Media Literacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking to communicate</li> <li>• Listening to understand</li> <li>• Reading for meaning</li> <li>• Understanding form and style</li> <li>• Reading with fluency</li> <li>• Developing and organizing content</li> <li>• Use editing, proofreading, and publishing skills and strategies</li> </ul>	English will be included in all of my son's Social studies, science & Health units. In addition to units, my son will complete grammar worksheets on a weekly basis and online Raz-Kids reading assignments.
SOCIAL SCIENCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heritage and Identity</li> <li>• People and Environments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The local community – Me on the map</li> <li>• Roles and responsibilities</li> </ul> <p>It might be relevant for the elements in yellow be more detailed by giving examples of what will be learned.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customized units</li> <li>• Worksheets</li> <li>• Reading comprehension</li> <li>• Project base learning (PBL)</li> </ul>
SCIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life Science</li> <li>• Physical</li> <li>• Earth and Space Science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senses and functions</li> <li>• Weather/Seasons</li> <li>• Plants</li> </ul> <p>The reader asks why one element is in red.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customized units</li> <li>• Multi-media</li> <li>• Experiments</li> <li>• Reading comprehension</li> <li>• Worksheets</li> <li>• PBL</li> </ul>



SUBJECT	COMPETENCY	SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS – BY THE END OF GRADE 1	TOOLS THAT WILL BE USED
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human Development</li> <li>• Personal safety and injury prevention</li> <li>• Healthy eating</li> </ul> <p>The elements in yellow appear to be themes rather than competencies to be developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal safety</li> <li>• Feelings and Emotions</li> <li>• Food/nutrition for healthy bodies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customized units</li> <li>• Multi-media</li> <li>• Experiments</li> <li>• Reading Comprehension</li> <li>• Worksheets</li> <li>• PBL</li> <li>• Sports participation</li> </ul>
MATH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number Sense &amp; Numeration</li> <li>• Measurement</li> <li>• Geometry &amp; Spatial Sense</li> <li>• Patterning &amp; Algebra</li> <li>• Data Management &amp; Probability</li> </ul> <p>The elements in yellow appear to be themes rather than competencies to be developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arithmetic - Writing Numbers</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Representing numbers</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Counting quantities</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Describing Non-Numerical and Numerical Patterns</li> <li>• Geometry - Locating objects in space and in a plane</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Representing and Comparing Numbers and = Symbols</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Skip counting Skip counts by 2s, 3s and 5s</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Counting from a Given Number Counting from a Given Number</li> <li>• Describing Plane Figures</li> <li>• Geometry - Describing solids</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Representing addition and subtraction</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Reading and Writing Numbers</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Representing and Comparing Numbers</li> <li>• A strategy for Comparing Numbers - Money (1¢, 5¢, 10¢)</li> <li>• Measurement- Estimating and Measuring Time</li> <li>• The 7 days of the week</li> <li>• Times of the day</li> <li>• Statistics - Using a table and graphs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ERPI Math Book</li> <li>• Work sheets</li> <li>• Situational Problems</li> <li>• Math evaluations</li> </ul> <p>If specific evaluations are done in Mathematics, it seems relevant that they would appear here and that they be described in Section 3 of the document.</p>

SUBJECT	COMPETENCY	SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS – BY THE END OF GRADE 1	TOOLS THAT WILL BE USED
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arithmetic - Building a repertoire of Memorized Addition Facts (1)</li> <li>• Addition table (0 to 5)</li> <li>• Number pairs (0 to 5)</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Building a repertoire of Memorized Addition Facts (2)</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Building a repertoire of Memorized Addition Facts (3)</li> <li>• Measurement - Estimating and Measuring Time</li> <li>• The 12 months of the year and the 4 seasons</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Identifying fractions</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Representing and Decomposing Numbers</li> <li>• Decomposing into tens and units</li> <li>• Arithmetic - Building a repertoire of Memorized Subtraction Facts</li> <li>• Subtraction table</li> <li>• Subtractions (0 to 5)</li> <li>• Subtractions (6 to 10)</li> <li>• A strategy for learning to subtract</li> <li>• Measurement - Estimating and Measuring Dimensions</li> </ul>	
ART	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual Arts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating and Presenting</li> <li>• Reflecting, Responding and analyzing</li> </ul>	Art will be included in all of my son's Social Studies, Science, Health and English units.
PLEASE NOTE: THE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OFFERED IN OUR FAMILY IS MUCH RICHER THAN WHAT IS DOCUMENTED IN THIS LEARNING PROJECT.			

