

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

What do educational institutions do when there are not sufficient qualified Jewish educators to fill their needs? Ilene Vogelstein and Cheryl Wadler Meskin explore this conundrum through the lens of early childhood education, where programs sometimes hire non-Jews for positions in Jewish education. The article raises concerns about the cost to Jewish education.

What Happens When Your Jewish Educator is NOT Jewish?

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Recruitment and retention of Jewish teachers is a critical issue for early childhood Jewish education. Not only do we need Jewish teachers, we need teachers who are also Jewishly knowledgeable. Some 30% of early childhood professionals are not Jewish, according to the report *Untapped Potential: The Status of Jewish Early Childhood Education in America* (Bowman, Burns & Donovan, 2000). A recent study sponsored by the Early Childhood Department at The Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education and the National Association of Jewish Early Childhood Specialists that profiled early childhood Jewish educators found that 50% of early childhood respondents reported they had no Jewish education and another 20% reported that they stopped their congregational Jewish education after their *bar/bat mitzvah*.

Early childhood Jewish education needs Jewish role models – people who strongly identify as Jews and who lead active Jewish lives.

Jewish early childhood education unfolds at the most critical time in a young child's life and the life of their family. It supports and guides the formation of a strong Jewish identity. *Eager to Learn* (2001), a publication of the National Academy of Sciences states, "There is no question that the environment in which a child grows up has a powerful impact on how the child develops and what the child learns." One of the most consistent findings in early childhood education research is the relationship between the skill and knowledge of the early childhood educator and the quality of the program. Seymour Fox (2003), in *The Art of Translation*, states that "a vision of Jewish education can only succeed when teachers understand it, are capable of teaching it in the classroom, and are committed enough to want to do it." If the primary goal of a Jewish early childhood education program is Jewish education, then teachers need to acknowledge that Jewish education is vital to the

lives of their students, they need support in their efforts to change their approach to teaching, and they "must believe in the assumptions underlying the approach" (Fox, p.274). They need to be knowledgeable Jewish role models.

Young children learn best when information and experience aren't relegated to specific times or special days. Children learn best from authentic experiences that are within a framework/construct that they can relate to and experience. If children are not practicing Judaism and don't have teachers who can deliver the information within a developmentally and experientially appropriate context because they themselves don't practice, then the entire educational experience is "decontextualized" – potentially becoming rote. The child and family have no way of attaching meaning to or connecting with Judaism in any significant and permanent way. Judaism and life should be in concert with one another. Teachers cannot integrate Jewish values, customs, rituals, stories, foods, thoughts about Israel, and traditions if they don't know or have not experienced them. In short, Judaism is life and life is Judaism. We must not separate the two. We need professionals who can integrate the two in meaningful and appropriate ways.

One might think this would not be a problem in communities with large Jewish populations, but two factors make it so: poor compensation and lack of status of these teaching positions within the community. Universities report a drastic drop in students interested in early childhood education as a career choice. The average age of current early childhood Jewish educators is 48. Most entered the field 10 or 15 years ago – in their 30s. Now, virtually no one enters straight out of college, except for teachers in ultra-orthodox schools. Most current teachers have not been part of the revolution in early childhood pedagogy or exposed to the latest thinking in brain research.

Professional development could rectify that lack of knowledge if people were interested in entering the field. But it is difficult to be interested when the average annual salary for a full-time early childhood Jewish teacher with a bachelor's degree is \$20,000 – with few or no benefits. The average salary for a public school kindergarten teacher is \$45,000. What would you advise your child choosing a career path to do? Why shouldn't they go into public education? One of the foremost reasons we have Jewish teachers at all is because they have spouses that can support them. For some, it is a wonderful part-time profession to enter when their children are still young and in school and they are seeking schedule flexibility. However, as women have entered the workforce, fewer and fewer individuals are looking to a career in early childhood Jewish education.

Does any of the above justify hiring non-Jewish teachers? Is it because there are no Jewish teachers knowledgeable in early childhood education? Is it because schools don't see their primary goal as centers of Jewish education? Is it because schools feel that a specialist, someone teaching Hebrew, Jewish songs, holidays and/or Bible stories, can adequately teach Jewish values a few times a week? Is it because schools feel that non-Jewish teachers are equally capable of teaching Jewish content and instilling Jewish values? Or, is it because schools don't look hard enough for them? Or is it that it's just not a priority?!

In smaller communities, the issue is even more complex. There may not be enough Jews who are Jewishly literate, have Jewish experiences, or a community with a Jewish culture. What, then, is a community to do? How do they provide authentic experiences?

The questions are obvious, the answers are straight forward, but the solutions are difficult to implement – especially when early childhood Jewish education is not seen as a priority. First and foremost, early childhood Jewish education must be perceived by the community as the pivotal first Jewish educational experience for children and their families. Only then will solutions to the problem be seriously considered and implemented. Second, improving compensation (salaries and benefits) is necessary in order to recruit new teachers who are interested in early childhood education as a career. Third, giving *kavod* to those in the field is crucial if we want to retain the teachers we have. Fourth, increasing the Jewish literacy of the existing professionals and providing teachers with authentic Jewish experiences for themselves is *critical* if we want them to provide authentic experiences for the children.

Jewish education at any level is not about integrating knowledge; it's about learning how to "BE JEWISH." We don't teach our children to "know." We teach our children to *act* as Jews and to think as Jews. Their teachers need to be doing the same!

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References

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Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Cheryl Wadler Meskin and Ilene Vogelstein state the obvious when they say that, "(Early childhood) Jewish education needs Jewish role models – people who strongly identify as Jews and lead active Jewish lives." What are some of the creative ways that your community has attempted to translate this statement into reality?

- To what degree are you convinced that salary is all that it would take to transform the status of Jewish educators? What other factors must be addressed in order to raise the professional status of Jewish educators?
- In what ways does early childhood education serve as a pivotal first experience of Jewish education for children and their families? What could be done to enhance these experiences in your community?