

Jewish Family Life Education and the Orthodox Day School

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Within the past several years, there has been a dramatic increase in the range of programs and services which share the heading of "Jewish Education." An example is Jewish Family Life Education.

Introduction

In its broadest sense, Jewish Family Life Education is a multi-faceted learning approach which strengthens and enriches the quality of Jewish family life. It is based on the assumption that the Jewish community's learning needs are ever-changing and that learning is a lifelong process.

Examples of Jewish Family Life Education range from *havurot*, *Shabbatonim*, and *minyanim*, to parenting workshops, marriage education and seminars on aging awareness. Basic to these programs is a confluent orientation: one which addresses both affective and cognitive facets of learning.

The focus of this paper is an experiential program implemented by the Department of Jewish Family Life Education of Boston's Jewish Family and Children's Service. The program was designed to create a positive group experience and role model for a class of difficult seventh and eighth grade boys in an Orthodox day school. The objective was to help the class become manageable and cohesive. While it is significant that this program could be implemented in such a setting, it has implications across institutional lines.

Background

The day school in this program is a traditional Yeshiva with classes meeting

from early morning to late afternoon on weekdays, and a half-day on Sundays. Religious subjects are taught in the morning, secular subjects in the afternoon. Students attend secular classes according to grade level, whereas religious courses are divided on the basis of knowledge and skills. The school has classes from kindergarten through grade 12, with segregation of sexes beginning with grade six.

For the past several years, the Jewish Family and Children's Service has maintained a close relationship with the school. The agency was initially invited to develop a program in which high school seniors could assess their career goals and plans for college. Over the years, additional needs were identified, one of which was a group dynamics program for junior high school boys.

The junior high school students were viewed as more problematic than usual, by the school as well as by the boys themselves. The seventh and eighth grades had a total enrollment of 11 students between the ages of 11 and 13. The students were described as "more immature than usual," "lacking physical and personal controls," "possessing short attention spans" and "demanding immediate attention of an individual nature." The school's main concern was that the students' "roughness and verbal abuse" compounded their lack of

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respect for themselves, each other and their teachers.

To remedy this situation, the school's principal and teachers requested a meeting with Jewish Family and Children's Service's Department of Jewish Family Life Education. Together, a program was conceived to assist the children in "acquiring respect for each other and learning to function as a group in a constructive, rather than destructive, manner."

The teachers felt that the children, as individuals, were concerned about the group's behavior problem and thus might be willing to deal with it in a group program.

The Program Plan

A co-led group format was designed with the intention that the interaction of two male leaders, in a give-and-take manner, would serve to model appropriate behavior. The group was described to the students as a "privilege" similar to the group for older boys. By stressing the "special nature" of this program, the group leaders (members of the Jewish Family and Children's Service's Jewish Family Life Education staff) and the school hoped to offset the negative image the children believed that the school had of them.

The program was structured in such a way that the boys had to work in a cooperative manner. Individual meetings were designed to be fun, serving as a break in the long day. Nevertheless, these pleasurable activities had specific purposes in the development of the group.

Concurrent with the student program were bi-weekly consultation sessions for the teachers. Consultation was provided by a Jewish Family and Children's Service casework supervisor. These sessions focused on the identification of problem behavior within the particular student group and guidance on how these difficulties might be resolved.

The Program

The experience of the Department of Jewish Family Life Education in working with adolescents within a variety of school and camping situations made it clear, in advance, that the basic concerns and interests of these students varied little from those of other boys just entering adolescence. The Department staff held that, regardless of the environment, most 12- and 13-year-old boys are dealing with typical pre-adolescent concerns. In other words, the expectation was that these would not be children totally sheltered from social influences and the media.

In addition, the impression was that "normal" social and competitive forces were central to the issues of group control and self-image, which the school had defined as key concerns. Without tackling the issue of growth—and the basic related issues such as self-image, responsibility, respect and competition—it would be difficult to effect change.

Accordingly, most of the selected group activities and discussions were introduced by means of characters, symbols, personalities or events with which young adolescents could easily identify. From these commonly recognized "trigger" ideas came closely related issues of role modeling, helping people and listening.

To illustrate: the first experiential activity was a discussion about the television program "Happy Days." Although an alternate topic was prepared in the event that the students had not been familiar with "Happy Days," the group leaders' hunch that the students knew the show well was borne out by an excited response to mention of the program. The atmosphere became a bit more relaxed, the students less suspicious of the leaders' intentions. The students were interested out of sheer curiosity, if nothing else—wondering who these guys were (from Jewish Family and Children's Service) and what they were up to.

By contrasting the personalities of

"Happy Days" characters the Fonz and Potsie, the boys developed criteria of what was, and what was not, "cool" behavior. The boys then applied these criteria to their own pattern of interaction. In so doing, an experiential mode of education conducive to their growth as a group and as individuals was able to be introduced.

The early meetings were nevertheless characterized by suspicion, cynicism and, later, anger on the boys' part. They suspected that the Jewish Family and Children's Service workers were either "shrinkers" (the boys' term for psychiatrists) or else spies for the school.

In the second meeting, these issues were brought to a climax. Earlier in the week, a teacher referred to the group as a "privilege," a term the group leaders had used in the first meeting. This action played into the boys' suspicion that the workers were indeed spies. As a result, the students took a pact of silence, coming to the second meeting angry, but refusing to tell why. A few of the boys, in particular, formed a rejectionist front and refused to deal with the workers. They were now in an uncomfortable position.

Consistent with the theory of Jewish Family Life Education, the children's "ownership" of the group was respected, and the boys were encouraged to ventilate their feelings. Through this process, the students became convinced that the workers were not spies. The interaction fostered a sense of trust in the group leaders and in each other. This trust, to an important extent, was based on the confidentiality built into the program. The boys were promised that their comments would not go beyond the group unless they desired it.

This incident gave the boys a new sense of optimism. The boys were excited by the fact that adults were seriously listening to their concerns and recognizing the legitimacy in some of them. Due to this receptivity, the boys were able to move from rhetoric to reasoning.

Based on this new sense of trust, an activity called "Bagel Bowl" was introduced at the third session. This was a very structured activity (much like the old "College Bowl" series) in which the boys had to cooperate to earn points. In this game, the boys resolved disputes by discussing them. When the issue of the workers' fairness in judging and scoring was questioned, the students themselves were asked to serve as judges of the matter. In this and subsequent events, the workers demonstrated respect for the boys, and in so doing, encouraged them to respect themselves.

The final two sessions revolved around a videotape play the boys developed. In one session, the boys wrote the script; in the other, they acted it out. The group leaders limited their involvement in these two sessions to audio-visual matters.

The workers' limited role put primary emphasis on the boys working together. The boys realized that cooperation was essential to create a quality play. Consequently, they took special pride in viewing the final product and sharing it with the principal and faculty.

At viewings of the videotape, the independent and cooperative manner in which the boys had worked together to produce their play was emphasized. This point was reiterated at an evaluation session which included the students, their teachers, the principal and the Jewish Family Life Education staff.

Conclusions

The videotape very clearly represented accomplishment of the program goal, that is, development of the class into a cohesive unit able to work together. Inherent in this development was the boys' new-found respect for themselves and others. The boys bragged about being movie stars, as opposed to being the worst class in the school.

While the program does not appear to be overtly educational, it is rooted in sound pedagogic theory. Inherent in a program of

this nature is a sense of fluidity and spontaneity that motivates students to get involved, if only out of curiosity.

The affectively-oriented activities resulted in a painless learning. "Bagel Bowl" is certainly more pleasurable than a quiz, and may result in more highly motivated students.

This program relied heavily on a series of group dynamics exercises to make the class more manageable. Consistent with the ideals of social work, the workers' relationship with the boys was based on mutual respect. Creation and maintenance of such an attitude is difficult, yet inherent to a successful affective approach. Instead of lecturing, the leaders listened. Instead of dispensing facts, the workers helped the students solve problems on their own. By giving the students the opportunity in the last few sessions to engage in self-directed learning, their sense of accomplishment was more genuine.

The fact that the students' play was videotaped has significance in and of itself. The tape made it possible to prolong the

positive, as the boys experienced the play as both performers and audience. Furthermore, the tape allowed the enthusiasm generated by the play to be rekindled, serving as an ongoing reminder of the students' accomplishments.

A program of this nature highlights the diversity of Jewish Family Life Education. While the program's goal may have been group dynamics and group management from the perspective of affect, this model is clearly applicable to more cognitive studies. Jewish Family Life Education can be used in a variety of pedagogic settings, both within and beyond the sphere of Orthodox Day Schools.

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. If he is indeed wise, he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

Kahil Gibran

(New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc.
1964) p. 56.