

Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Day Schools: Parent Experiences by Sandra Miller-Jacobs and Annette Koren

Fundamental to Judaism is the recognition that all people are created in the image of God, and, therefore, all are to be valued, respected, and educated, regardless of their differences. But do Jewish children with special needs have access to intensive Jewish education in day schools, where almost a third of enrolled children now receive their education?¹ If so, what is the experience of day school like for them and their families?

Recently, Boston day schools have begun to respond to the demands of these parents. They are hiring special educators and aides to meet the needs of their students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, learning disabilities, and Asperger's Syndrome. In 2000, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), Committee on Services to People with Disabilities, placed education on the top of their priority list and provided funding, beginning in August 2001, for a full-time Director of Special Education Services at the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston (BJE). It was hoped that such a person would move the Jewish Special Education agenda forward for day schools, as well as for congregational schools.

Community leaders now wonder whether Jewish schools are morally, even though not legally, obligated to provide an education for students with disabilities. Special educators question how far day schools can stretch to meet the needs of more diverse populations. Parents worry about how to provide the best secular and Jewish education for their children. Day school personnel, along with parents, express concerns about how to offer a Jewish education without harming the child's self-esteem.

Within this context, the Director of Special Education Services at the BJE created a taskforce of parents and day school special educators and administrators. The purpose of this group was to examine these difficult issues and to expand the day schools' ability to better meet the needs of students with learning difficulties. This group met monthly throughout the year and undertook two major initiatives – gathering information from parents and creating a pilot program to address needed social skill development.²

This research uses the parent information gathered from this initiative to draw a picture of the family experiences with the day schools – educationally, Jewishly, socially, and communally.

Methodology

The Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston (BJE) distributed questionnaires to all local day and congregational schools for them to further distribute to parents. It is impossible to know how many people received the questionnaire. There were 52 completed questionnaires. Those parents who indicated a willingness to participate in a focus group were invited to attend one of three that were held over a two-month period. Of the 29 parents invited, 19 participated.

Focus Group Participants

Children whose parents participated in our focus groups have a variety of special needs ranging from moderate to severe. Some children have more than one diagnosed learning disorder and some parents have more than one child with special needs. This accounts for the difference in the total number of cases in the table below

one child with special needs. This accounts for the difference in the total number of cases in the table below (25) and the total number of focus group participants. (19)

Table: Children of Focus Group

Participants

Learning Disabilities	13
Multiple Disabilities	4
Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder	2
Asperger' s Syndrome	3
Pervasive Developmental Disorders / Autism	1
Cerebral Palsy	1
Emotional Disorders	1

Six of the thirteen Boston area day schools were represented by focus group participants. This paper explores these experiences, along with the attitudes of parents whose children attended day school and were counseled out; those who remained in day school with modifications for their children's educational needs; and those who never sent their children with special needs to any day school. The table below lists the number of children in each category represented by their parents in our focus groups.

Table 3: Placement of Focus Group Children

Counseled out or left a day school	12
Remained in day school with adaptations	5
Never considered day school	8

Commitment to Jewish Education

The parents in our focus groups all wanted day school educations for their children, not because they were looking for small exclusive private schooling, but because they wanted a strong Judaic education for their children.³ All the parents were committed Jews, whether Reform, Conservative or Orthodox. For those whose children had been in day schools and were asked to leave, parents turned to other day schools, congregational schools, and/or private tutors for their children's Jewish education. Families continued their Jewish practice and maintained their connection to their Jewish communities. While there may be other parents for whom the break with the day school shattered their connection to Judaism, the parents who came to our focus groups want the system to change so that their children can be part of a day school environment.

Experiences

Day School Not an Option

Six parents considered their children's special needs beyond the capabilities of day schools from the beginning. All but one of them have other children attending day schools and appreciated the advantages of having their children's Judaic and secular education in the same community and same physical location. However, these parents chose never to contact day school admissions offices for their children with more significant special

needs.

"We knew we were rejected before we even started and didn't even bother to let them slap us around."

One parent whose child went to public school only later thought that day school might be an option, based on her child's enthusiasm and success with Jewish congregational education. The day schools she contacted turned her away saying, "forget it. We're not set up for your kid."

"I have a child in a Catholic school ... Religion is on the table so they download pictures of a Hannukiyah for her to color in on Hannukah and apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah ... It's quite nice, but it was certainly not our first choice."

Three parents used private, special education schools for their children. One of them had left day school in second grade. For the other two, day school was never an option. Two of these parents have children enrolled in Catholic settings.

Staying in Day School

Some parents found school personnel tried hard to make accommodations. While some were satisfied with the support services received, most continued to question whether they had made the right decision by keeping their children in day school. They felt torn between the sense of belonging to a day school community and the nagging doubt that their children might receive more services in the public sector. They agonized over the conflict between their own and their children's Jewish identification and their desire to provide the best education without compromising their child's self-esteem.

"The school has adapted its curriculum. He skips one humash period a day to go to the Learning Center."

Leaving Day School

Some families were counseled out of day school (9); some independently chose to leave (3). The process of being counseled out of the school was a difficult one, both in terms of accepting the diagnosis of special learning needs and the social implications for the child and parents.

"Whether it's Schechter or JCDS ... or Rashi, whatever --as parents, you want to be part of that community of parents raising their children as Jews. We've been excluded from that."

Children with special needs are frequently counseled out between second and fourth grade. For some, the school counseling came across as caring and supportive, but other parents felt they and their children were treated with a lack of sensitivity or concern. One parent talked about being told over the telephone that her child should not return.

If parents decide not to keep their children in day school, they have to deal with problems related to having different children in different schools. This can be no more than a logistical nightmare. However, it can also create a dichotomous social situation within the family which is now part of two school communities, each with different expectations and different cultures.

"Here we are talking about Derekh Eretz ... and they come back and say, 'This is not our problem. This is your problem. Your child has special needs; you go deal with it. Go put him in public school.' How can they do this to a parent? I must have cried for a year because of this. I've never felt so much pain in my life."

One participant said she would not send her younger child to day school after her first had been counseled out. She did not want to give one child what she was unable to provide the other. Another participant has three children: the oldest is in public school after leaving day school at the end of 1st grade; the second also goes to public school in order to “avoid too much schlepping”; the third is not yet in school, but the family is considering sending him to day school. Another parent has four children in four different schools.

In fairness to day schools, they cover in three or four hours what the secular schools cover in six. This intensifies the curriculum, leaving little time for the kind of review and practice some children need. It also requires greater organizational skills. The demands on a child to read and produce projects in up to eight subject areas in two different languages puts additional stress on the school, as well as the child.

Secular education after day school

Many Boston area suburban school districts are known for providing high quality special needs services that parents feel comfortable using. One parent described the public school program as “phenomenal.” There are five children with two teachers in her daughter’s class. The day school, she said, “can’t compete with that kind of language-based disabilities program.”

“They should have been able to handle him. They should have been able to do better with him than they did.”

Some children’s disabilities seemed less significant within the context of public school. This may be due, in part, to the broader range of student abilities there. In some instances, the children who transferred under pressure from day schools were included in regular classrooms where teachers made accommodations that appeared simple and obvious to the parents. This left parents feeling that the day schools could have done more.

Jewish education after day school

Parents sent their children to congregational religious schools after day school, based on the families’ affiliation, rather than the school’s ability to provide special needs services. They expressed various degrees of satisfaction with these schools. Some children were able to keep up, because they had the advantage of previously being in day schools and were now able to excel. For others, the experience was less positive. Parents felt that their children’s’ needs were not being addressed and/or that they were not fitting in socially.

“My daughter attends ... Sunday school ... with an aide who is actually quite excellent, but as a Hebrew school ...there is nobody on the staff on a supervisory or a teaching level that knows anything about inclusionary teaching, about having multiple teachers in a classroom, having different paced learning. My child is certainly on the extreme, but I’ll often sit in the class and see another 17 or 18 kids (who have very different) abilities, but the teacher is doing one thing. There is no accommodation to any child in the classroom.

Some parents, including unaffiliated or those affiliated with minyanim, used tutors for Jewish education, especially for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Children work well in one-to-one learning experience provided by private tutors.

Some children remained engaged after leaving day school. Other students and their parents have found the experience caused them to question where they fit in Jewishly, how, and even if, their children will continue

Jewish practice.

"We're not sure what's going to happen to him in the future Jewishly. When we sent him to public school he wore his kippah the whole first year. Now, we take him to (worship services) and he says, 'No, I'm not Jewish. I'm not going to do this stuff.' "

Effects of day school issues on parenting self-confidence

Parents of children with special needs face wrenching decisions concerning their children's education. In every area, there are decisions that give the parents opportunities to doubt themselves. This is intensified in the day school environment by the perceived trade-off between providing Jewish education and getting the best possible secular education that addresses special needs.

Regardless of the outcome of the decision to stay or leave day school, wrestling with questions raised can be an agonizing process. For example, how much stress does a child feel? How hard is the child working to keep organized or to get through the day with a smile? Is this the right school?

Implications

Many parents we talked to want day schools to better serve children with special needs, even if it is too late for their own children to benefit from this education. These parents have the potential to be a rich resource. They are passionate about their children and their Judaism; they remain involved in the Jewish community; and they are willing to work as advocates for Jewish education for children with special needs.

- In order to adequately address the issues of educating students with a variety of learning needs, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders need to work together to develop a strategic plan and models for implementation.⁴ Day schools also should investigate ways in which they can collaborate and share resources.
- Special education needs to be openly placed on the agenda of schools and communities. Schools are concerned about maintaining reputations for excellence and continuing to attract students without disabilities while becoming more inclusionary. Finding the right balance requires thoughtful planning and discussion with all stakeholders.
- Schools need to provide professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure early identification of special needs and to create inclusive classrooms supporting the learning of all children.

It is important to remember that special education is not only about teaching students with special needs; it is also about meeting the variety of learning styles and educational needs of all students who are already sitting in Jewish classrooms. As one parent stated, "The kinds of teachers that the special needs kids need, the other kids need, too." The creation of an inclusive Jewish community benefits those of us without disabilities as well. It creates a caring community. It affirms all of us. It says we see the godliness, the inner soul of each of us.

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Endnotes:

1. Leora Isaacs. "What We Know About . . . Enrollment." in Stuart L. Kelman (ed.). *What We Know About Jewish Education: A Handbook for Today's Research for Tomorrow's Jewish Education*. Los Angeles, CA: Torah Aura Productions, 1992. p.64.
2. Simultaneous to these efforts, three south area day schools collaborated (in part funded by grants from BJE and CJP) to create a regional approach to support the special learning needs faced by some of their day school students.
3. These parents were self-selecting and may not be representative of all parents who might have wished their children with special needs attend day schools.
4. Dr. Miller-Jacobs and the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston have developed models and are working with day and supplementary schools on their implementation. While some day schools outside the Boston area offer classes for children with substantial special needs, these are often provided in self-contained classrooms with some mainstreaming for lunch and special programs. Inclusive programming for students with moderate learning problems is still not systematically being addressed nationwide in day schools.