Welcoming New Teachers into The Professional Culture of Jewish Day Schools

by Cindy Dolgin

From the days of the poor melamed (teacher) traveling from shtetl to shtetl to teachers in today's state-of-the-art and internet-wired classrooms, the voice of the teacher has been muted in communal decision-making on Jewish education. In an anthropological sense, the Jewish teacher is a liminal figure, neither here nor there, both loved and ignored.

Missing in Action: The Voice of Teachers

While Jewish communal planners and policy-makers are busy calculating the exorbitant costs of building more day schools, principals scurry to find "ready-made" teachers available for hire for the already-existing schools. With the retirement of large numbers of veteran teachers looming in the coming years, it is surprising that so little attention is being paid to the lived experiences of new teachers entering the unique professional culture of specific Jewish schools in particular. Any national attempt to cope with the personnel shortage will be ill-informed, without first listening to the needs and experiences of teachers inside specific schools.

The Good News: Increased Demand for Day School Education

The good news is that demand for full-time Jewish education is on the rise, as day school education is increasingly seen as the backbone of Jewish identity building in the Diaspora. According to national studies such as the 1999 report of the "Task Force on Jewish Day School Viability and Vitality," commissioned by United Jewish Communities and JESNA from 1987 to 1999, the number of new Jewish day schools that exist has increased from 660 schools enrolling 168,000 children to 810 day schools enrolling 212,000 children.[1] (Curiously, this report does not include a count of teachers!)

The Bad News

The bad news is fourfold. First, it costs a lot of money to provide a day school education and infrastructure that can compete with other private schools and the better public schools. According to the report, "Talking Dollars and Sense about Jewish Education," commissioned by the AVICHAI Foundation and the American Jewish Committee, "because of the high costs of meeting their budgets and construction costs, day schools often give short shrift to several other needs. These include: adequate salary and benefit packages for their faculty and staff, purchasing and maintaining computer equipment, and developing proper curricula and providing enrichment for faculty."[2]

Second, the increased demand for day school education is occurring simultaneous to a worldwide decrease in the supply of teachers throughout the English-speaking world[3] and static or decreasing supply of Hebrew-speaking teachers, as was well documented in the summer 2001 edition of Jewish Education News. An increasing number of new teachers do not consider teaching a life-long career commitment and do not earn a traditional education degree[4], which indicates to me that if schools want to guarantee for themselves quality of teacher preparation, more teacher learning will have to move in-house.

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Third, absent from the national agenda on Jewish day school education is serious or specific talk of the necessity to support in-house teacher learning and growth, including novice-new-teacher and veteran-new-teacher induction, mentoring, peer-coaching, and sustained communities of learners. One would think that these needs are obvious, particularly as most well-established day school faculties are graying and significant numbers of teachers are approaching retirement age, while new teachers coming in with their own gifts and talents can certainly benefit from the sharing of experience and pedagogic/content knowledge possessed by veteran members of the faculty.

Fourth, but definitely not least important on the bad-news list, is that the voice of classroom teachers has, so far, been absent from the national dialogue on the future of Jewish day school education. As far as I can tell, the national task forces that make recommendations that ultimately guide the allocation of limited financial resources exclude the participation of classroom teachers.

Conceptual Framework of New Teachers' Experience of Professional Culture

This study, conducted as part of a qualitative inquiry for a doctoral dissertation on the professional culture of Jewish day schools as experienced by new teachers, seeks to give voice to recently-hired teachers, as they describe their welcoming, induction, and ongoing enculturation into the community of professionals at the school that hired them.

The conceptual framework and semi-structured interview protocol builds on research undertaken by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a five-year qualitative study of 50 new Massachusetts teachers. In that study, Kardos et al[5] identified three predominant professional cultures, with the Integrated Professional Culture correlating most strongly with teacher retention over the long term:

- Veteran-oriented professional culture, where the modes and norms of professional practice are determined by and aimed at serving veteran faculty members.
- Novice-oriented professional culture, where youth, inexperi- ence, and idealism prevail, full of vigorous commitment but little professional guidance about how to teach.
- Integrated professional culture, which encourages ongoing professional exchange across experience levels and sus- tained support and development for all teachers

Three people who have recently undertaken teaching as a full-time career participated in this qualitative study. All three share certain characteristics – all made career changes over the past 2 - 4 years and have become school teachers in their 40's. All are North Americans actively involved in the Conservative movement whose own children have attended Ramah summer camps. All three have sent their own children to Solomon Schechter day schools.

But, each came to teaching from a different circuitous path, and each has had prior life experiences that are unique to them. They do not represent anyone but themselves. Nevertheless, sharing their stories of professional culture in schools may illuminate the national discussion on the need for ongoing teacher learning in day school education.

Route to Teaching

Laurie* was a Ivy League undergraduate, earned her M.B.A., and was a Wall Street executive until she and her husband left NYC for the suburbs with their two children. Her work in marketing was intellectually stimulating, but did not bring her deep down satisfaction. She always had teaching in the back of her mind and saw it as a more meaningful career that was more compatible with family life and values – though she has since learned through experience that teaching is an around-the-clock preoccupation.

Returning to school for a Masters in Education, Laurie gave birth to her third child and began to teach part-time in a synagogue nursery school before searching for an elementary school teaching position. When public school job offers did not materialize, Laurie applied for and was hired at a Schechter school. Laurie was very warmly accepted by the veteran faculty, many of whom had been teachers of her three children, but she is well aware that new teachers who are "outsiders" have not had as warm a welcome or smooth a transition as she. For new teachers who are outsiders, it is difficult to break into the veteran-oriented professional culture.

Laurie is also well aware that many of the general studies teachers leave the day school for better paying positions in public schools. Laurie does not dismiss the possibility that she will one day leave for public school, but as long as her husband continues providing well for her family, she will be happy to stay at the day school.

Sam worked in various businesses and taught part-time in a congregational religious school, led Junior Congregation, and began a Master of Arts degree program in Jewish education before deciding to become a Conservative rabbi. Ordained by JTS, Sam served as a pulpit rabbi, but left his congregation, relocated with his family, took a salary cut, and became a Bible and Rabbinics teachers in a Jewish day high school to accommodate his wife's conflicting and higher paying career demands. In his first year of teaching in a relatively new school, with a novice-oriented professional culture, he was struck by the fact no educator was able to act as the sole support of a family.

Sam never completed the degree in Jewish education, which, in any case in the early 1980's, did not include hands-on methodology classes, only educational theory and content-based courses. Sam was hired, handed several binders left by his predecessor, and "was pretty much left to my own devices. I mean, I wasn't told to sink or swim, but basically, that's what happened."

Ann also taught in a supplementary school for a few years, after returning to the United States from Israel, where she and her husband lived for seven years, learned fluent Hebrew, and bore her children. Like Laurie, Ann also went back to school to earn a teaching degree.

However, Ann firmly decided against teaching in a day school, despite the obvious positive contribution she could make to a system she believes in, because the salaries and benefits are so poor, and because several of her friends had bad teaching experiences of being thrown into "sink or swim" situations with little or no support from fellow teachers and administrators. Ann is now in her second year teaching English in a public middle school where she experienced a thorough induction and mentoring process and continues to enjoy the fruits of an integrated professional culture that she credits for getting her teaching career off on an adventurous, inquisitive start.

Ann's public school experiences are included in this study because few Jewish day schools currently provide the kind of sustained welcoming that she received in a public school, yet she can imagine the model she experienced – while far from perfect - being adapted and implemented in Jewish day schools.

Formally Being Mentored

Ann: I started teaching with a provisional license, and was mandated to have a mentor my first year. Carol was my mentor…We had a very trusting relationship. Her room was right across the hall. I could just run across the hall between periods to get supplies or advice. And it is unbelievable how generous Carol was with her time.

But I never felt she was being put out for me, because I paid for her services. Five hundred fifty dollars were deducted from my salary that first year, and it was so worth it to know I was not just a pain to her.

We met on the first day of school, which in my opinion was too late. … I had already planned for and laid out the whole first month. But, after that month, Carol told me she thought it would be better if our lessons mirrored each other's. It sounds weird now, but I cannot tell you how grateful I was to have full access to her materials and to have her explain it all to me, the why's behind the how's. The drawback was feeling confined and being told what to do. But now that I'm a second year teacher and I don't have Carol as my mentor, I'll admit that I miss it.

Learning the Roles of Mentor and Protégé

Ann: More than a month into the school year, we went to an all-day workshop for the mentors and protégés. Until that day, Carol had no idea what she was supposed to do as my mentor. …After that one-day workshop, she realized we would both be better off if I wasn't just doing it exactly like she does it, but that we develop materials together. After that, Carol checked in with me every morning and we planned everything together. We started with Carol's objectives, but then co-planned every step of the lesson that it would take to meet the objectives. By the spring, we also started creating the objectives together.

Not all mentoring relationships work out, you know. If the mentor and protégé teach different grades but have the same free periods, it can still be a very successful experience, helping the new teacher learn the ropes, learn the short-cuts, manage the classroom, get organized, learn how to structure units of study, how to communicate with parents. But I think it has be a structure, with meeting times scheduled and sanctioned by the administration, not just "let's meet for coffee." That's being a pal, not being a mentor.

Q: If I were interviewing Carol instead of you, what do you think she's say about becoming a mentor?

A: I think she would say she never imagined how mutually beneficial mentoring would be. She assumed it would be only a giving relationship,(but) she became excited and enlivened by being a mentor.

The Informal Scaffolding of a Day School "Insider"

Laurie did not have any formal mentoring, though she had strong camaraderie with many teachers who once taught her own children, and quickly developed a close informal working relationship with Diane, the other first grade teacher who was herself fairly new to the school. Laurie found herself a buddy and both learned a great

deal from a collaborative teacher who specialized in reading. Their one year partnership was mutually beneficial, until Diane took a higher paying public school job.

The Price of No Mentoring

Other than asking questions of the experienced Social Studies teacher who sat near him in the faculty room, Sam received no personal assistance in learning to teach until the third year on the job. Until then, opportunities to talk to teachers were "a hit or miss kind of thing. Part of it is, when you see people, who's free when you're free." Sam relied on his personally satisfying experiences as a learner to figure out what and how to teach, regardless of how well that pedagogy met the needs of his learners:

Sam identifies as problematic the fact that none of the day school Jewish studies faculty ever attended day high school, but instead were products of public school. "We're all using on high school students the text-study techniques we picked up as text-learners in graduate school. This is the wrong pedagogy for adolescence, but we haven't figured out the right one! There is also no set curriculum in our school or a professional association that links us to other Judaic studies high school teachers. Nor is there money budgeted to attend other kinds of education conferences, or even the RA convention. But, everyone, including me, enjoys the freedom to teach whatever they want. If you were to ask me to describe the unified vision of what the students should know that graduate from this school is, I would say that it is a mystery." Rabbi Sam made a five-year mental commitment to teaching when he started. Four have gone by and he is not sure where his career is heading.

Conclusions

There are no flawless cookbook recipes that guarantee the retention of excellent teachers, but there are certainly ways that schools can be increasing the likelihood that teachers will become excellent and will stay in Jewish education. Mentoring as part of broader induction program beginning several weeks before the start of the school year, explicit training for mentors, scheduled time for collaborative planning, non-evaluative observation cycles, and compensation for the mentor's time are necessary ingredients in structuring a meaningful and generative welcoming program for new teachers and their mentors. These components must fit into the school's overall plan for ongoing professional development, so that all teachers continue to learn as they continue to teach.

As the retirement of hundreds of long-term career day school teacher approaches in long established day schools, and as new schools throw open their doors with promise and hope, teachers, principals and policy-makers ought to be aware that newcomers to teaching entertain much broader career options than did the cohort of soon-to-be retirees who entered teaching as a lifelong career. They ought to be carefully thinking about the nature of the professional culture that will greet new teachers, as it is planned by administrators and as it is experienced by new teachers, so that the development of teaching practices gets off on the right foot, is not just left to the teacher's own devices in a sink or swim environment, and happens in a accordance with the school's specific mission and philosophy. An integrated professional culture is no guarantee that teachers will stay with a school until retirement, but it will likely lead to more confident and effective teaching for the duration of a teacher's tenure

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Endnotes

1. Yanowitz, B. Report of the task force on day schools. New York: United Jewish Communities & Jewish Educational Services of North America, 1999.
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4. Peske, Heather G.,Edward Liu, Susan Moore Johnson, David Kauffman, Susan M. Kardos. "The Next Generation of Teachers: Changing Conceptions of a Career in Teaching." Phi Delta Kappan. December 2001.
5. Kardos, S. M., S. M Johnson, H. G. Peske, D. Kauffman, and E. Liu, "Counting on colleagues: New teachers encounter the professional cultures of their schools." Educational Administration Quarterly, 2001. 37(2), 250-290.

*All names used are pseudonyms.