Inservice Education: A Priority for All Seasons

By Sara S. Lee

Staff Development

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In general education there have been a variety of "seasons" during recent decades, each season emphasizing a particular path to improved education in our society. Educators and educational literature have reflected the impact of world events such as Sputnik, social issues such as discrimination, ideological trends such as political conservatism, and research findings in education and allied disciplines. These influences have led to focus on one aspect or another ranging from total school structure to curriculum to educational goals. Currently inservice education, or as more broadly defined — staff development, is a central concern. Research, books, and articles attest to its importance, since all evidence points to the conclusion that the knowledge, skill, and commitment of staff are the critical variables in the success or failure of any educational innovation. It is essential, therefore, for Jewish education to draw upon the knowledge and research about inservice education in the field of general education for the purpose of application and adaptation to the needs and realities of Jewish schools.

The current literature in general education emphasizes the important role of staff development in improving education and creating effective schools, while documenting the many weaknesses in existing inservice programs. Wood and Thompson found, "While educators are generally negative about current practice, nearly all teachers and administrators see inservice education as crucial to improved school programs and practice."[1] The probable causes of this dissonance are: 1) a view of teachers which suggests that inservice must be imposed on them against their will; 2) programs of inservice which are remote from the real needs of schools and teachers; 3) inservice models which ignore important principles of adult learning; and 4) discrepancy between practices utilized for inservice programs and practices advocated for the classroom.

The problem is also exacerbated by the lack of individualization in such programs and the lack of attention to implementation strategies for transfer of the training to the classroom. In the case of the former, Louis Rubin states, "Not only are teachers inherently different but they also change differently: much as in the case of the students they teach, there are slow and fast learners, inductive and deductive thinkers, and predispositions toward structured and unstructured learning conditions."[2] He concludes that the same inservice experiences are not appropriate for all teachers and that learning for teachers has to be individualized.

In terms of implementation strategies Joyce and Showers[3] delineate the essential components of effective inservice and assert that the inclusion of these steps in combination is necessary if there is to be impact on the education of children in the classroom. The components are: presentation of theory or description of strategy; modeling or demonstration; practice; feedback; and coaching for application. In addition to the issues previously discussed there are the perennial problems of inadequate budget, lack of supervision of teachers, absence of comprehensive staff development plans, and inefficient deployment of inservice personnel.

Awareness of the problems of inservice education gives us only a limited insight into the practices of staff development. New perspectives derived from research greatly enhance our understanding of significant guiding principles for the effective practice of inservice education. Virtually every writer in this field emphasizes that the individual school is the most appropriate setting for staff development. Goodlad[4] demonstrates that the school is the primary unit for change, while Dillon-Peterson[5] posits the interdependent relationship between individual development (teacher) and institutional development (school). From different perspectives, then, the most effective inservice paradigms are those which relate to the unique characteristics of individual schools and their staffs, while creating the necessary support structure within the school to assure implementation and maintenance. Such an assumption carries with it implications for the role of the principal as well as the utilization of resources outside of the school. Principals must be prepared by training and by setting of priorities to act as instructional leaders. Wood, Thompson, and Russell cite literature which demonstrates, "The school principal is the gatekeeper for adoption and continued use of new practices and programs in a school."[6] Furthermore, resources external to the school must mediate between their priorities and those of schools, for such resources must become part of an overall plan that addresses the stated needs and objectives of professional growth in an individual institution.

The implications for Jewish education are twofold. Institutions which train professional leaders for Jewish educational settings must examine their programs in terms of the emphasis on preparation for instructional leadership. Leadership implies mastery of theory as well as practice, awareness of the larger contextual issues, and understanding of organizational dynamics. Greater priority must be given to these concerns, as opposed to an almost exclusive focus on content and method. In reality it is only a synthesis of these various elements which creates a foundation for instructional leadership. At the same

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time, there must be greater attention to the inservice education of principals in order to strengthen their competence as designers and implementers of staff development for their teachers. This need relates to our second implication regarding deployment of communal resources in Jewish education. The investment in centralized workshops, institutes, and conferences appears to be of limited value in the light of the research cited. A better use of our agencies and institutions would be a concentration on the continuing education of principals, combined with a concentration of our energies and resources in individual schools. The goal would be to help the school and its staff become a self-sufficient unit in terms of its ongoing staff development. These proposals would require an evaluation of the roles and relationships of the several agencies and institutions charged with the supervision of Jewish education.

The Role of the Teacher

A second fundamental principle regarding inservice is the recognition that our programs must relate to teachers as adult learners. While this appears to be a statement of the obvious, such a conclusion ignores the reality that our staff development programs have not been influenced by the research on the unique characteristics of adult learning. A review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, but a number of points are salient and relevant to our subject. One basic assumption is that adult learning is highly ego involved. Adult learning experiences, therefore, must be perceived by the learner as non-threatening and personally meaningful. Inservice education which is identified with evaluation, judgment, and priorities of others does not meet the above criteria. On the contrary, inservice education must be in the context of concern and respect for the adult learner, while addressing perceived personal and professional needs.

Since adult learners are most likely to attempt new behavior if they believe they have some control over the learning situation, teacher participation in the planning and implementation of inservice programs is vital. Knowles[7] summarizes the fundamental principles of adult learning theory as follows: 1) the powerful motivation of needs and interests; 2) the important role of life experience; 3) the need for self-direction; and 4) the impact of individual differences. Another significant factor is the need for adults to see the results of their learning and to receive feedback. If we aspire to successful inservice education, these principles must be the foundation of the programs we design.

In the practice of Jewish education, most inservice models reflect the perception of teachers needs by agencies, institutions, and administrators rather than the real needs of teachers. Participation by teachers in the planning of inservice programs is infrequent, at best, and consequently there is little vested interest in such programs. Individual differences are rarely addressed, and in my experience most workshops are constructed as if every teacher brings to the learning situation the same background, style, and professional history. Indeed, the provision of an opportunity for the individual teacher to manipulate the particular content of the workshop in terms of his/her perceptions, needs, or style is frequently absent. This oversight is compounded by the failure to provide the important implementation and follow-up structures that would enable the teachers to achieve a positive result for their efforts, or, at minimum, see a relevance of the content of the workshop. Agencies and individuals in Jewish education must begin to apply these principles of adult learning if we hope to design successful inservice models.

Another common theme in the literature on this subject is the correlation between staff development and organizational development. Eisner states, "The school needs to become a professional community with space enough for teachers to grow as professionals."[8] In order to achieve this goal the school should be viewed in the context of organizational development for as Dillon-Peterson asserts, "The function of organizational development is to promote the effectiveness of the organization in ways which are parallel to or include those adopted by staff development to improve the effectiveness and satisfaction of individuals."[9] One might view the parallel in the form of an analogy. Staff development is to the individual (teacher) what organizational development is to the collective (school, institution, etc.), in terms of growth, effectiveness, and change. The two must go hand in hand. Common to both are long-term commitment to program, involvement of participants in planning, participation and full-fledged support of leadership, provision of a support system, and adequate fiscal resources. These are the hallmarks of effective staff development and organizational development.

Such a perspective mandates greater attention on the part of Jewish educators to the theory and practice of organizational development and group dynamics. The health and growth of Jewish teachers depend on the viability of the schools within which they function. These schools are social systems subject to the same principles and dynamics of other social organisms, and we are compelled to deal with them drawing upon the most sophisticated approaches available to us. This reality has implications for the training of educational leaders and the development of consulting resources for Jewish education.

To conclude our inventory of trends in staff development, we turn to a consideration of the importance of teacher attitudes. Rubin reminds us, "Attitudes — the predisposition to behave in particular ways — are thus central to the entire teaching act: a skill will go unused if the holder does not perceive it as worthwhile."[10] His point here is that innovations are only successful to the degree that they are congruent with a teacher's attitudes toward self, student, subject and the world at large. Teacher attitude must not only be an important consideration in the planning of inservice, but must be a part of inservice experience itself. The creation of an open and supportive environment in which attitudes can be explored and their implications analyzed is an essential component for teacher growth. Opportunities for identification and delineation of teacher attitudes should be part of an ongoing program of inservice and supervision.

> *"Whenever we get in trouble as a nation, we always turn to education."*
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> Ruth Love, Superintendent of Chicago Schools

Prevailing Conditions

Any discussion of the application of principles of inservice education to Jewish education must take into account prevailing conditions. In the main, teachers in Jewish schools are part-time, particularly in supplementary schools. As such they may not view themselves as professionals, they are only available on a limited basis, and inservice education is not perceived integral to their function. Few institutions make inservice a part of a teacher's contract and offer incentives for professional growth. More often the pressure for inservice is related to Bureau of Jewish Education codes for certification and salary scales. Consequently inservice education is not identified with the individual school. The demand for teachers leads to hiring individuals without preservice training and thus assumptions about teacher skills are fallacious, and distinctions between inservice and preservice are not valid. In many cases the two are synonymous. Supervision, which is an important component of inservice, is often sporadic given the part-time schedules of teachers, the lack of adequate supervisory personnel, and budgetary limitations. Finally, many Jewish schools outside of major urban centers operate as isolated units without any organization, agency, or body of consultants who could provide inservice resources.

In the context of these realities and guided by the principles discussed previously I will describe several approaches, although this by no means exhausts the possibilities. *Microteaching* as described by Allen and Ryan[11] is a most promising model for it allows for synthesis of a specific skill with a variety of content. Teachers can be instructed in a given skill and yet can practice it in the context of their own curricula and for their particular age group. This allows for individualization and immediate transfer. The microteaching model focuses on one skill at a time, providing for demonstration of the skill followed by teachers creating their own microlessons (five minutes in length), teaching them in a real setting, and receiving immediate feedback. Lessons are then modified and retaught until mastery is achieved. The advantages are: 1) this is an efficient model given limited time; 2) the skills to be taught can reflect real needs generated by teachers; 3) there is provision for individualization; 4) teachers work together as peers reducing the sense of threat and building an atmosphere of professional community; 5) mastery is built in, fostering a sense of success and achievement; 6) the content is immediately relevant and adapted to the realities of a particular school and group of teachers; and 7) there is immediate feedback. Microteaching is a model that has proven successful with a variety of populations ranging from graduate students in Jewish education to heterogeneous workshop groups at conferences. It is both realistic and congruent with important principles of effective inservice education.

Teachers' centers are a model quite different from microteaching, but offering many comparable advantages. The premise is that a teachers' center in an institution provides resources, both material and human, which are readily accessible, address stated needs, and respond to individuals in the context of their teaching settings. In addition the teachers' center is an important support system since it is non-judgmental and presumes that all teachers have something of value to share. Teachers' centers provide models of many different approaches to effective instruction allowing for individual teachers to select from and experiment with a variety of options. New skills are learned at the teacher's own pace and based on the teacher's desire to learn the skill in question. The concept of teachers' centers is discussed by Thornbury[12], and networks of such centers are already established in both general and Jewish education.

A natural context for inservice education is the ongoing curriculum development and adaptation in a school. Departmental or grade level teams addressing curriculum issues can assess the skills and knowledge necessary for successful implementation. These needs become the agenda for staff development. They are immediate, relevant, and personally meaningful to the teachers involved. Training is planned and carried out in a natural support group. Control of the learning situation is vested in the teachers themselves and success is readily apparent in more effective curriculum and implementation. The utilization of the team approach around a shared concern is a promising model in need of greater elaboration.

While we must exercise caution in transferring models from general education to Jewish education, there is a significant area of shared concerns in the practice of staff development. The commitment to personal and professional growth is a priority of all educators, whatever their setting. The insights of adult learning theory and organizational development apply to all educational institutions. Above all, lifelong learning is a cherished value in Judaism — a value which educators themselves must model if they are to be true to their calling.

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