

Strengthening Innovation Through Strengthened Relationships Between Jewish Educational Practitioners and Researchers

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While no one can explain why the Covid 19 pandemic was set into motion at this time, I believe that we have a responsibility to elicit as much constructive and productive result from it as possible. What each of us can consider is the ways in which the pandemic has compelled change and improvement. This is an important consideration on a personal level, and, by extension, on the broader communal level. For those of us committed to the Jewish education field this presents an opportunity to transform the challenges Covid 19 presented into imperatives for radical improvement.

Based on my work with many stakeholders across the field, I believe the lessons of the pandemic point to the need to strengthen the relationship between Jewish educational practice and research. They play complementary roles in advancing the ultimate outcome of Jewish education – engaged, inspired Jewish learners with strong, positive Jewish identities and a connection to

our people.

Research and experimentation add to the field's basic and applied knowledge as well as provide evidence to document which innovations bear fruit. As a long time and dedicated funder of Jewish day school education, the Mayberg Foundation has been supporting innovation and experimentation in the field for the last decade. Over the past eight years our professional team through the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC) has addressed the pervasive issue of day schools not meeting the ultimate goals of Jewish education by stimulating the field through new models and new approaches to convey Judaic studies. In the last century, the Jewish lens of education cited in Pirkei Avot, “The reward is in the effort” (5:12), has been unwittingly replaced with the general studies achievement paradigm, “The reward is in accomplishment.” This focus has resulted in a seeming failure to ensure every student's success in Judaic studies and has resulted in weakened Jewish identity and self-esteem among many day school and yeshiva graduates. The future of our Jewish nation relies on Jewish schools successfully building an internal foundation for a lifelong love of learning, relationship with God and strong Jewish identity.

A Direction for Experimentation and Change

Over the past year, educational leaders, teachers and parents recognized the need to reprioritize what students learn and how they are taught with particular consideration for social-emotional

learning and spiritual learning. So, when I consider how the Covid pandemic might open a unique opportunity for advancement in the Jewish education field, I am hopeful that the status quo was disrupted in a way that will precipitate a student-centered and God-centered future in Judaic studies and across entire school environments.

I have seen a tremendous amount of experimentation as part of my work with JEIC. I've learned a great deal about the underpinnings of successful educational models from those with whom we partner. And I have seen that innovative Jewish educational practices shaped by relevant research can yield positive outcomes for Judaic studies learners. That was true before the pandemic, and it has been reinforced throughout the pandemic.

Take for instance the work of Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP), a research-based approach for relationship-centered education that incorporates our sacred texts as one of the learning partners in *havruta*. Now being used in a variety of day schools and supplementary schools across the country including a new cohort in the Midwest, this methodology is creating significant change in students' abilities to engage in civil discourse and their perception of text study being relevant to their lives, adding depth and richness in shaping their opinions.

Another example is The Idea Institute's approach to innovating Jewish education through the well-researched and studied model of project-based learning. Exemplified by the Inquiry

Beit Midrash (IBM), implemented by The Idea School, this relatively new educational design has already shown indicators of success. Student reflections have documented that the personalized, deep Jewish experience coupled with the variety of expressions available to demonstrate learning have positively impacted their learning by infusing meaning into areas of study that before were all too irrelevant and impersonal.

Noteworthy are the growing numbers of schools utilizing different personalized learning modalities. Asynchronous learning structures have been a welcome companion to synchronous teaching, and they have proven tremendously valuable in enabling teachers to differentiate for students' learning needs, interests and 21st century skill building. We have seen schools successfully create their own asynchronous learning modules through any number of digital tools as part of their blended programs (with synchronous time being in-person or virtual). Additionally, we have seen schools effectively integrate robust Jewish learning modules hosted by asynchronous platforms designed by expert educational providers such as Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy, Sulamot and Online Judaic Studies Courses at VHS Learning.

Finally, we are observing positive outcomes from schools trialing innovations developed by their own teacher leaders and visionaries that are inspired by or steeped in well-established theories or practices related to multi-disciplinary study, universal design for learning, meaning-making and stan-

dards-based learning.

High-level research is regularly produced through universities and nonprofits with Jewish sensibilities and focus. We look to institutions like the Azrieli Graduate School of Education & Administration at Yeshiva University and the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education at The George Washington University, among other well-respected institutions for applicable research, aimed specifically at Jewish learners, Jewish lives and the Jewish community. Exploration of topics on spirituality, identity, engagement and community lean directly into what we are trying to achieve in Jewish education. But the relationship between researchers and practitioners works in both directions. Equally important is for Jewish educators of all professional levels (i.e. teachers, instructional leaders, administrators and heads of schools) to bring forward their insight and experience to inform the questions researchers explore so that new investigations are relevant and usable for today's educational settings. Certainly this is happening in some segments of the field, but imagine how much more powerful it could be if researchers and practitioners had more opportunities to be curious together.

Private consultancies with top level researchers provide skilled expertise to Jewish educational providers seeking knowledge about their learners and program design effectiveness. Imagine if actionable information was culled from proprietary research and shared so it could be extrapolated to benefit other

Jewish educational settings. After all, everyone in Jewish education shares the ultimate goal of an engaged, educated and committed Jewish community and future generation.

Also valuable in the effort to innovate Jewish education are the principles and best practices from general research about nurturing and educating the whole child that can be applied to Jewish settings. Knowledge abounds on social-emotional learning, spiritual development and positive psychology through experts who study education and human development. Consider the impact that research on positive psychology or the psychological aspects impacting religion and communal connections (e.g. believing, bonding, behaving and belonging) could have on the development of new models for inspiring and connecting students to Jewish values, literacy, practice and belief.

Research remains an academic exercise if it is not utilized by the field. When connected to field applications, its outcomes point to possible pathways toward innovative solutions and can be mined to realize the full value of experimentation and financial resources that are invested. I believe it is imperative for Jewish educators to learn from well-studied, proven practices and pedagogies to guide their efforts to optimize student internalization of Jewish wisdom, identity and decision making.

A Call to Action

I believe that the work we pursue with other like-minded investors in Jewish education innovation creates the ground-

work for meaningful progress and sustained change. The timing of the pandemic's disruption is magnificent as the pot has been stirred and both exciting Judaic studies models and new professional development opportunities have emerged. To the extent that we observe results from these innovations that indicate we are on the right track, we will continue to invest in developing and scaling new models. And we will continue to stimulate philanthropic partnerships in supporting systemic growth and change in the field. Jewish learners in all types of settings—not just classrooms—can benefit from a stronger interplay between educational practice and research. Local and national funders can effectuate this field-wide improvement through their advocacy and support for experimentation in the field and implementation of educational models and professional development programs

that look to evidence-based practices and research.

Funders play an essential role in driving the future of Jewish education. If research and the implementation of data-informed innovations are not given priority of resources, the status quo prevails, and we continue along accepting mediocrity and underperformance. When funders express an urgent need to do better by allocating resources to strengthen the future generations through innovative educational models that develop a whole human being rooted in the distinct pursuit of developing Jewish identity through relevance of text and a relationship with God, all boats rise. Funders have the potential to align on a vision of Jewish education fulfilling its potential to engage every student in a lifelong journey of growth and fulfillment on both personal and communal levels.

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