

Reflections on “Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens”

Jeffrey S. Kress

I begin by offering my congratulations to the authors and to the Jim Joseph Foundation for their work on this very important piece of research. As a member of the advisory team I have had the privilege of participating in very rich discussions about this project as it developed and I am grateful for the opportunity to comment here. There is much to commend about the current [study](#), including the scope of the information synthesized by the authors who notably include study sites from outside of the Jewish world.

Addressing Active Ingredients: The More Things Change....

To me, the biggest contribution of this study is in addressing *higher order* issues in youth engagement efforts. What do I mean by higher order? Let's think about an imperfect analogy to someone who has just tasted a delicious soup. How, this satisfied slurpper wonders, can I make something like this myself? We would all recognize the futility of *lower order* responses such as "Be sure to make it delicious," or "Just make it tasty." These answers essentially repeat the question. In youth work, we often find similar lower order suggestions - such as "Make sure participants like it," or "Just make it engaging" - which seem self-evident and raise more questions than they answer.

Likewise, while the person interested in cooking the soup may gain some enlightenment from a discussion of the definition of *soup* (or whether the dish was actually a soup or perhaps a bisque, or a consommé, or even a stew), it is unlikely that this would lead to the ability to create the tasty dish. Yet we find ourselves similarly bogged down: "Is experiential Jewish education the answer? What is experiential education anyway? Can we distinguish it from other forms of education? "

To create a version of the soup, we would want to know the ingredients and procedures most likely to achieve this level of deliciousness. *Successful youth programming does not result from a recipe; there is no secret formula to ensure a particular outcome. It is not, however, a result of random trial and error.* Higher order analysis seeks to identify what might be considered to be *active ingredients* of experiences that engage youth. The findings of this study confirm a long-standing line of research in Jewish and secular education. The importance of relationships, accessible role models, and empowerment of youth to take ownership in shaping activities are all actionable components that can be put into the programming mix. While success is not guaranteed, and the implementation of these elements is much more difficult than it sounds, the findings of this study provide a solid set of actionable recommendations that address the needs and reality of the learners. In the current study, these elements are discussed in so-called

"informal" settings, but there is no shortage of research of their importance in formal settings (think about "engaging classrooms") as well.

Given the longstanding appreciation of the factors described by the authors, a skeptic might wonder, "Do we really need another study to tell us this!?" Of course, there are elements that are new to the discussion, such as the importance of technology and social media as well as issues of location and accessibility. I would further disagree with this skeptic on a more fundamental level. In the social sciences, the replication of research under changed circumstances or in a different context is fundamental to the understanding of core concepts and ideas. I have participated in conversations that can be summed up as "If we could only develop a really flashy app, we can change the course of Jewish youth engagement." A fundamental lesson from this study is that even with the major shifts in the context around us (and these are indeed serious shifts...growing up "these days" is unique in many ways), there are key fundamentals that remain crucial. Yes there are certainly major differences in the developmental context of today's youth. But, to paraphrase a saying by Dale Berra (Yogi's son), while today's youth may be different from their predecessors, their differences are similar.

Community? What Community?

The subtitle of this report implies that "Jewish communities" will learn from the programs in this report. As my mind wanders, I can envision a meeting around a long board-room table in Anytown, USA. The leader bangs her gavel and announces, "I'd like to bring to order this meeting of leaders-of-thinking-about-the-Jewish-youth-of-our-community." The participants – including actual youth – nod in agreement and start discussing the report. But then the image fades, and I start wondering....

We refer to our "communities" as if they are not only identifiable entities but also as if they are organized to meaningfully address the challenges of youth engagement. The work is hard enough in sub-communities; even denominationally-based efforts to coordinate youth initiatives prove challenging. Addressing the needs of youth in "our community" requires more than a proliferation of innovative programs (to say nothing of the issue raised by Charles Kadushin, commenting on the original report posting, that the authors do not discuss criteria for programmatic effectiveness). Growing youth engagement will require deep understanding of both the youth and the programmatic offerings in each community, and how the intersection of these can best be promoted. This will call for loosening institutional boundaries, as well as making changes to existing institutions in order for them to embrace some of the active ingredients discussed in this report. That is, it will require brave leadership willing to put the needs of youth first, both within and among individual institutions.

As illustrated by the work of the Rose Foundation in Denver, described by Lisa Farber Miller and Samantha Hea in a previous posting about this report, there are no shortcuts. I sometimes hear education described as creating transformative “A-ha” moments. We’ll need those for sure. For communities to, in the words of the report, “learn from programs that work, we’ll also need the sustained, often frustratingly-slow efforts involved in community organizing for the good of youth.”

Dr. Jeffrey S. Kress is Associate Professor of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He also serves as Academic Director of the Experiential Learning Initiative, funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation, at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at JTS.