Reactions to Jim Joseph Foundation’s Teen Report

In 1995 when I returned from college and was asked to serve as a part-time youth director for a local congregation, I had no plans to be a full-time Jewish professional. Eighteen years later, I have worked with hundreds of Jewish youth, the majority in their teen years. I have lived and worked in four Jewish communities across the country; I have worked in congregations and community agencies, ran a national teen education initiative and now serve as an education consultant – often with teen programs. And, despite seeing and participating in dozens of models of Jewish teen education, I have yet to see the silver bullet initiative emerge.

I want to commend the Jim Joseph Foundation for the in-depth due diligence investigation that they pursued. While a study can never showcase every dynamic aspect of an initiative, this report does a great job of covering so many important features.

Based on my own experience working and consulting in the teen education space, I would like to propose three additional "Implications for Strategy Development" that merit the attention of funders and community leaders considering future community-based Jewish education initiative for teens: (1) the intervention method of engaging pre-teens, (2) the importance of engaging and educating parents, and (3) the desperate need for pedagogic training of youth educators.

Pre-Teens
The most important and successful interventions for engaging teens happens with pre-teens. While the report indicates that the Foundation’s primary interest is on programs for post-b’nei mitzvah youth, I believe that any robust community-based teen initiative should include an examination of how that initiative includes strategies to begin connecting with teens before their bar/bat mitzvah. There are some excellent models of organizations that do this work including three of the Jewish organizations highlighted in the research study.

One of the most lauded Jewish education encounters in the field today is Moving Traditions’ Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing. The curriculum for It’s a Girl Thing begins with 6th graders at a time where issues facing the pre-teens can be addressed in a safe space. “Cyber-bullying, sexting, the abuse of prescription drugs, and internet porn did not exist as problems facing 12-year old girls – but today these issues are real and girls need a safe, sacred space to wrestle with them. Rosh Hodesh addresses these and many of the core challenges facing girls... ¹” The success of drawing pre-teens into post-b’nei mitzvah programming is evident – Moving Traditions now has five years of It’s a Girl Thing curriculum being used across the country, demonstrating their ability to engage teens from 6th grade through 11th grade.

Several of the youth foundations around the country, which the Jewish Teen Funders Network supports, are targeted for pre-b’nei mitzvah youth, or those that are in their b’nei mitzvah year. In many cases, these pre-teens go on to participate in alumni teen philanthropy programs. BBYO, whose strategies were mentioned several times in the report, recently launched a new concentrated effort designed just for 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. This program, called BBYO Connect “offers teens a variety of experiences to help bridge the gap between immediate pre- and post- Bar/Bat Mitzvah and High School programs.”

In addition to directly serving the pre-teens, it is important to note that some teen philanthropy models and BBYO Connect mobilize high school aged teens to engage with their younger peers. This model provides the pre-teens with Jewish role models and mentors, and offers a unique learning opportunity for older teens to be empowered.

Pre-teen strategies allow organizations to build relationships with their future core audience, helps build brand recognition, and allows for pre-teens to see a Jewish life beyond b’nai mitzvah.

Parents
On page 3 the introductory section of the report reminds readers that “…teens’ lives also remain strongly influenced by their parents.” Yet, while the report’s appendix notes organizations that conduct parent education, the report itself does not discuss teen-parent education programming as an integral part of community-based teen education initiatives. I think this is an oversight.

In the dozens of teen/parent programs I have facilitated, all with a specific methodology, I have witnessed incredible dialogue and exploration between the two generations. Parents are consistently thankful for the opportunity to engage with other parents, to learn from each other, and to have sometimes challenging conversations between them and their teens facilitated. When parents experience value in a program, they are more likely to strongly support and encourage their teen’s participation. Oftentimes parents don’t consider how Judaism can guide them in their teen/parent relationships and how Judaism provides an ethical framework for the difficult challenges teens face. When parents are engaged and learn how to use a Jewish lens, they are more likely to reinforce the content in their homes.

Moreover, data shows that parents still remain the top indicator of teens’ identity and influence over personal choices. Regardless if those choices are Jewish in nature, secular, or "risky behavior" (i.e. smoking, alcohol and drug use, or sexual behaviors), the message parents convey and the behaviors they
model provide the most influence on the teens. If new and emerging communal teen initiatives fail to intentionally integrate teen/parent learning into the strategy, they are missing an incredibly critical element of successful teen education.

**Pedagogy**

Pedagogical Approach was identified as one of the key learnings in this report (pg 9). In recent years, the concept of “experiential education” has been used and misused to describe the most successful pedagogy in working with teens. While the report itself doesn’t use this term in this section, many readers may insert the experiential education umbrella over the modalities this section describes. In the section titled *Implications for Strategy Development*, “experiential education” (pg 14) is in fact referenced, but incorrectly. The report gives examples of group games and role-playing as samples of experiential education – but they aren’t necessarily so.

This misuse of the pedagogy terms was the focus of an October 2012 blog I authored entitled “*Formal Learning at Informal Limmud*.” In it I write, “The confusion first sets in when we mistakenly interchange education settings for education methods. There are commonly accepted formal settings (classrooms, lecture halls, meeting rooms) and informal settings (camps, youth lounges, coffee shops) but there are also formal methods (lectures, structured research and tests) and informal methods (games, project-based learning, collaborative exploration).” Experiential education, which has a specific methodology, is one of many informal education methods.

I only mention this complicated understanding of successful teen education pedagogies because it leads to a question of the training of teen workers. Many professionals who work with teens are not classically trained in education pedagogies. The report includes dedicated sections on the role of young staff and adult volunteers, which are both important. However, these individuals should have the training necessary to effectively educate and engage teens.

In my work, I have often been confronted with the misconception that youth work does not have a curriculum (because it’s “informal”). Yet, every learning encounter should have intentional goals, a strategy for accomplishing them, and a method for evaluating them. Untrained youth leaders often lack the skills and knowledge of education pedagogy to develop a comprehensive education approach. But those tools are needed to achieve positive outcomes through informal methods.

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When the Jim Joseph Foundation and their partner funders begin to review proposals for new communal teen education initiatives, it’s crucial that they consider the role that professional development plays and how the community intends to ensure that anyone (professional or lay) working with the teens not only understands education pedagogies, but that they understand how to implement them in both formal and informal settings.

Conclusion
After spending these last two-and-a-half years engaged with the Jim Joseph Foundation and its research partners in the process to develop this report, I am thrilled to see it released, dispersed widely and being robustly discussed. I anxiously await the next steps for the development of high-level, dynamic and financially well-supported communal teen initiatives.

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