Investing in Jewish Education: A Paper for the Jim Joseph Foundation

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While the problems of Jewish continuity cannot be solved by education alone, a broad consensus is emerging that high quality Jewish education remains the community's single most promising instrument for enabling Jews to form and maintain a strong connection to Jewish life. This claim rests on an expansive understanding of Jewish education as the deliberate and purposeful engagement of Jews in their Judaism at all stages of the life cycle. Indeed, as Jewish education has moved to the top of the communal agenda, the opportunities for Jewish learning have increased for Jews of all ages.[1] Still, the best window of opportunity for the Jewish community remains the years of childhood and adolescence when educational institutions and families are focused on providing learning experiences that will shape the Jewish identities of the next generation.

As the Jim Joseph Foundation prepares to make significant investments in youth education, it is reasonable to ask: what are the most promising, urgent and important opportunities? Should the Foundation concentrate on day schools, the most intensive form of Jewish education, or should it invest in congregational education where the majority of Jewish children still receive their education?[2] Should the Foundation focus on summer camping and other forms of experiential learning whose informality, many claim, is the route to a child's Jewish heart?[3] We know, for example, that trips to Israel can have a powerful effect on participants' Jewish identity.[4] Yet others argue for early childhood education on the grounds that a head start on Jewish learning will reverberate throughout the Jewish educational system.[5] Perhaps we should focus on those years when youth begin to make their own choices, in college and afterwards, investing in Hillel or in the explosive growth of grassroots minyanim for the urban twenty-something population.

Which form of Jewish education, which setting or developmental stage holds the most promise? There is no definitive answer to such a question. This is not merely because we have not yet carried out sufficient research, for no research can provide conclusive evidence one way or another. In the first place, one size will never fit all: different children respond to different kinds of educational experiences in different ways. We do not expect all children to love soccer or become pianists and we should not expect Jewish children and youth to thrive Jewishly in the same way. Moreover, the availability of educational choices is extremely important to today's parents.[6] But most importantly, the question is unanswerable because educational effectiveness is a product not of a particular setting or structure but of the *quality* of the experience.

Educational theorists sometimes talk about educational quality in terms of whether a particular experience is "educative." Educative experiences have two dimensions, one present-oriented and one future-oriented.[7] Educative experience connects with the learner's *current* needs, interests, and purposes in authentic and meaningful ways, and lays the basis for continued learning by raising new questions, enlarging possibilities, developing new insights and fostering the skills and dispositions needed for *future* learning. Thus, educative experience is both an end in itself and a means to further learning.

Jewish educational experiences must be educative – and this is true for camping no less than day schools, for Israel trips no less than early childhood programs. They must respond to present needs and interests, while at the same time opening up the child's horizons to future possibilities of learning. But they must be even more than that. To be effective, Jewish educational experiences must touch the head and the heart; they must develop beliefs and understandings, actions and behaviors, but especially loyalties and commitments. Above all else, Jewish educational experiences must shape the identities of those who participate in them, so that they emerge from those experiences with deeply rooted dispositions – to be students of the Jewish textual tradition, or lovers of Zion, or stewards of the environment, or seekers of truth, or speakers of Hebrew, or repairers of the world, or responsible for their fellow Jews, or responsive to the Divine. In this way, Jewish education must be *transformative.*

Transformative Jewish education does not happen by itself; it can only be enacted by qualified educators. Good curricular materials can help and technology is a powerful instrument, but it is the educator him- or herself who must have the capacity to create learning opportunities for others that are educative, even transformative. That is the Achilles heel of the continuity effort: the Jewish community has not yet invested the necessary resources to produce in adequate numbers the kinds of educators who are able to provide transformative Jewish education in various settings, nor has it invested in the development of the knowledge base to support that effort. There are many exciting and ambitious Jewish educational programs in North America, some new and growing and others well established; these programs are certainly deserving of support. But without an investment in the education of educators, these efforts will never achieve their potential.

In what follows, I develop this argument in greater detail, focusing on two main themes: building capacity in the field and developing a knowledge base in the form of "cases of success". For each theme I sketch out an implementation strategy.

## Capacity Building

While there is no one way to improve Jewish education, without knowledgeable, skilled and passionate educators, we cannot begin to address the challenge. In any educational setting, what students learn is a function of what educators teach and what educators teach is a function of what they know, care about and can do. Just as educators cannot teach what they themselves do not understand, so they cannot educate in ways that they have not seen or experienced. There is no way around this simple truth. If we want high quality Jewish education for children and youth, we have to provide high quality learning opportunities for those responsible for that education, learning opportunities that enable educators to deepen their own Jewish knowledge, imagine a broader range of educational possibilities and examine those possibilities more critically and with greater attention to impact. This includes front-line educators as well as planners and leaders working in diverse settings.

The lack of qualified educators is a perennial problem in the field and one of the most frequently cited causes for its uneven quality.[8] We applaud the impressive growth in trips to Israel, for example, but who is offering serious professional development for Israel trip leaders, helping them consider the ways that those trips might be educative or even maximally transformative? The growth in early childhood programs is promising, but who is developing

informed conceptions of what early childhood Jewish educators ought to know and be able to do, or teaching them how to combine engaging learning activities for young children with compelling education for parents? Above I referred to the explosive growth of alternative grassroots minyanim; who is helping those fledgling organizations become communities of learning and places of personal transformation?

The same question can be asked about most other forms of Jewish education: who is helping supplementary school directors envision new educational models and new ways to cultivate the knowledge, skills and commitments of their mostly part-time teachers? Where are camp directors learning to create staff development programs that teach counselors how to build informal cultures of learning infused with Jewish values and experiences? Is anyone bringing educators together, from across *different* settings, to learn from one another? Even in the area of day school education, where some new programs of teacher education have been developed, only a fraction of the needed teachers are being produced. While the programmatic growth of the last two decades is impressive, it has not been matched by a parallel investment in the people who construct the educational experiences or in those who provide educational leadership.

Serious professional education and development takes into account the learning needs of educators at different career stages. For example, many entry-level Jewish educators have little or no formal preparation for their work. Since few educating institutions offer systematic support and development, many new educators, be they teachers, youth leaders, camp counselors, are forced to learn on their own through independent trial and error, relying on whatever experiences they can draw on from their own past. These are not the conditions that nurture excellence or enable someone to imagine a fruitful career trajectory.[9] Think about all the committed, energetic college students and recent graduates hired by schools, camps and synagogues to educate Jewish children and youth. How could we create flexible arrangements to help these young adults deepen their own Jewish knowledge, apprentice in person and via technology with the most creative educators, and form a social network and community of practice based around meaningful personal and professional learning.

<u>Implementation Strategies for Capacity Building</u>

To enhance the quality and quantity of knowledgeable and creative Jewish educators, the Jim Joseph Foundation ought to invest in the following three related implementation strategies.

First, the Foundation should partner with institutions of higher education that already engage in thoughtful approaches to capacity building, in order to build on their experience and encourage their development. Serious professional education fosters knowledge, skills and dispositions through appropriate pedagogies of understanding, skill development and professional formation. Such programs need scholars interested in the needs of educators and educators who can model and explicate powerful practice. It's time that Jewish education created the equivalent of the teaching hospital – exemplary educational settings where scholars and practitioners collaborate on applied research, educators are trained, and new ideas are tested. The Jim Joseph Foundation could pioneer this new structure through partnerships with institutions that have the appropriate scholarly and professional resources along with close ties to the field, reshaping the field of professional education and its impact on the education of Jewish youth.

The Foundation should also partner with national organizations like PEJE, the Foundation for Jewish Camping, and the nascent Center for Excellence in Congregation Education, to create new programs for frontline educators and educational leaders that take into account the latest research on professional development.[10] A growing body of high quality research reflects a consensus about the kinds of learning opportunities that deepen educators' knowledge and skill and prompt their application of this knowledge and skill in practice. For example, educators gain more from professional development when their learning is reinforced over time through repeated and varied exposure to ideas and through interactions with colleagues who can act as resources for each other's learning. Learning opportunities that challenge educators intellectually and are built around powerful images of teaching and learning are more likely to move them toward higher standards of practice. Professional development programs for Jewish educators should give serious consideration to these and other related themes.

Third, the foundation should create a scholarship fund for those who express their desire to become Jewish educators. While some fellowships do exist, the reality – confirmed by our study of incoming students at Brandeis – is that potential educators, both young adults and career-switchers, are deterred by the cost of tuition combined with the modest salary expectations. The Foundation ought to endorse the proposition that no capable student who wants to work in Jewish education should be turned away because of the cost of tuition or saddled with loans for years to come.

Adopting a serious strategy for building capacity through professional development would raise the standards of practice, enhance the stature of Jewish educators, and strengthen the quality of learning opportunities for Jewish children and youth.

Practice-Centered Cases of Success

A second investment strategy involves documenting the work of accomplished Jewish educators and successful reforms in Jewish education and using that work to systematically improve the practice of Jewish education across diverse settings. Framed appropriately, the expertise of talented Jewish educators constitutes a large, untapped resource that could be used to fuel significant improvements in Jewish education on a large scale. For that to occur, we need to capture the work of talented educators and reformers and share that knowledge and expertise in ways that contribute to the development of educators, their educational institutions and their students.

The field of general education has developed compelling written cases of successful education at both the individual and the institutional levels that can serve as catalysts for serious deliberation and improvement.[11] These cases help educators visualize new forms of education not previously imagined. Their thick descriptions of actions and interactions stimulate careful thinking about the enactment of educational purposes and values and about how institutional cultures shape norms and standards.

Within Jewish education, we have isolated examples of this kind of literature. For instance, every serious and thoughtful leader in congregational education has encountered Joe Reimer's *Succeeding at Jewish Education* (Reimer, 1997), which offers a careful description and close study of what actually goes on in offices, hallways, and classrooms of one particularly

successful congregation – and more importantly, discussions of the ideas *behind* those practices. In the day school sphere, Daniel Pekarsky's forthcoming case of a vision-guided Jewish day school (Pekarsky, 2006) does something similar. Neither book provides "best practices" to be imitated, but something more valuable: an opportunity to understand the educational challenges within that institution, a framework within which to raise questions about one's own institution, and the possibility of envisioning alternatives to the status quo. In this way, these two books offer "usable knowledge," scholarship that grows directly out of thoughtful practice and that can contribute directly and immediately to its improvement.

A different but equally suggestive model of the generation and use of cases in the systematic improvement of educational practice comes from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.[12] For several years, Carnegie has been supporting talented teachers in studying and documenting their teaching practice and representing it in web-based cases. Recognizing that much of good teaching is invisible because it happens inside the heads of the educators, Carnegie researchers help accomplished teachers make the invisible visible, by videotaping their lessons, collecting evidence of student learning, and articulating the thinking behind their decisions and actions through interviews and reflections. Multi-media cases constructed from these materials and archived in a virtual library become valuable resources for transforming practice through professional education and professional development.

Implementation Strategies

The Jim Joseph Foundation should transform the discourse and practice of Jewish education by supporting the construction of cases of success – from micro-cases that document and analyze particular transformative educational strategies, to cases of talented Jewish educators at work, to cases of successful Jewish educational reforms, to cases of extraordinary institutions – and their use in professional development contexts.

To support the creation of inspiring cases of successful educating institutions and transformative teaching, the Foundation would have to create or partner with one or more institutions with the capacity to study, document and create representations of this work. Such an institution or network of institutions would need technological expertise, skill in collaborating with practitioners, and an infrastructure for case development and dissemination. Over time, this investment could produce an archive of exemplary cases and their use in the education of Jewish educators. Unlike exemplary practice which disappears, cases of exemplary practice endure. They can be visited and revisited by new and experienced educators for insights and inspiration about what transformative Jewish education looks and sounds like, and what it takes to make it happen. Besides stimulating a new genre of scholarship, this investment would make a lasting impact on the thinking, discourse and practice of Jewish education across multiple settings.

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[1] In 1989, Walter Ackerman, professor emeritus of Jewish education, observed: "American Jews who are concerned about Jewish education cannot complain of a lack of opportunity. From nursery school through Ph.D. programs and beyond, one can attend institutions sponsored and maintained by Jews for the purpose of teaching Judaism. Only the commitment to learning, first by the family and then by the student himself sets the boundaries to Jewish studies" (Ackerman 1989, p. 78). Recently, Jack Wertheimer (2005) noted that "the infrastructure of educational programs, both formal and informal, in quite a few communities has attained a new level of maturity and offers children and their parents a range of attractive options" (p. 5). One of the biggest areas of growth has occurred in day school education. Schick counted 759 day schools in the U.S. in 2003-04 which was 80 more than in 1998-99 (Schick, 2005). Teen education is also receiving more attention and funding; bar/bat mitvah used to be the culmination of Jewish education but today educators are developing a range of programs to keep young people in Jewish educational settings through their teen years (Wertheimer, 2005).

[2] There are approximately one million school-age Jewish children (Beinart, 1999). Of those, 205,000 were enrolled in elementary and secondary day schools in 2003-2004 (Schick, 2005); 250,000-300,000 are enrolled in supplementary schools (Katzew & Rapport, 2005); 26,000 are enrolled in some other form of Jewish education, such as private tutoring; and over 200,000 are not enrolled in any form of Jewish education (Goodman *et al.*, 2002; Kotler-Berkowitz, 2005).

[3] Sales and Saxe (2002) in *Limmud by the Lake* write that "the fun of camp makes campers open, available to Jewish practices that they might scorn at home. The intensity of camp creates intensity around Jewish life. The separation of camp from the outside world and the close-knit quality of the camp community make it possible to live Judaism at camp in a total, holistic fashion. Judaism is lived as a matter of course at camp and takes no extraordinary effort."

[4] In their evaluation of birthright israel, Saxe et al document both short-term and longer term effects. According to the researchers, the trip strengthens participants' feelings of connection to Israel and the Jewish people and increases their confidence in explaining the situation in the Middle East. Participants in the Winter, 2003-2004 indicated that the trip expanded their knowledge of Jewish history and strengthened feelings of Jewish connection. (Saxe, Kadushin, Hecht, Rosen, Phillips & Kelner, 2004)

[5] "There is growing awareness that early childhood Jewish education is an important venue for Jewish identity building not only for young children, but also for their entire families. Research shows that parents who enroll their young children in programs sponsored by the Jewish community report increased celebration of Jewish holidays, ritual observance, Shabbat candle lighting and recitation of Kiddush, as well as more Jewish friendships, greater awareness of the Jewish calendar, and a desire to learn more about Judaism. Conversely, Jewish families with children in nonsectarian child care report a decrease in the number of holidays observed and feel less involved Jewishly (Pinkenson, 1987). A similar study by Ravid and Ginsburg (1989) concluded that an early childhood Jewish program, which emphasized parent involvement, is associated with a positive change in the families' Jewish practice." ("Spotlight on: Jewish early childhood education", 2003). Studies show that 1 in 7 children (or about 100,000) Jewish children between ages 1-6 are enrolled in an early childhood program that is specifically Jewish.(Kaplan, 2002; Goodman, 2002).

[6] "Today parents are choosing Jewish education, and are actively involved in insuring the best possible fit between each child and the school they select. They do not hesitate to enroll each child in a different school, provided that the fit is right for the child." (Wertheimer, 2005).

[7] John Dewey distinguished between having experiences and learning from them. He distinguished between "educative" and "miseducative" experiences primarily on the basis of whether the experiences nurture eor arrested development. One clear source of these ideas is *Experience and Education* These ideas have particular salience in Jewish education where we are concerned not only with the transmission of values and ideas but with the shaping of affective ties and ethical behavior (Dewey, 1938).

[8] A study by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (Gamoran *et al.*, 1998) found that a majority of Jewish educators in congregational schools and early childhood programs in three lead communities lacked both Judaic knowledge and pedagogical preparation. They also found that despite the absence of substantive knowledge and formal preparation and the part-time nature of the work, a majority of these educators still saw Jewish education as a career to which they were devoted. Such findings lend support to the idea of investing in teacher development as a tool for improving educational quality. Kaplan (2002) and Goodman (2002) report on early childhood programs where 45% of the educators have no significant Jewish education which may account for the high variability of Jewish content in these programs (Goodman et al., 2002; Kaplan, 2002).

[9] The shortage of public school teachers and the high rates of attrition during the first three years of teaching has focused the attention of policy makers and educators on the needs of beginning teachers. Most states and districts require some form of new teacher induction, but few schools are set up to provide the kinds of resources, guidance and support that is strongly associated with teacher satisfaction, effectiveness, and retention (Ingersoll & Smith,

2004; Johnson et al., 2004). In her new book, *Down the Up Staircase*, Carol Ingall portrays a similar situation in Jewish day schools where new teachers routinely cope with limited resources, no formal curriculum and no regular and easy access to the expertise and guidance of more experienced teachers (Ingall, 2006).

[10] For a thoughtful synthesis of this research, see Michael Knapp (2004).

[11] Examples of institutional case studies include Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Good High School*, George Dennison's *The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School,* Deborah Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas*. These books allow the reader to wander the classrooms and hallways, to see the teaching and learning, to listen in on conferences with parents and administrators, to learn how the culture of the school shapes norms of interaction and standards-in-use. (Dennison, 1969; Lightfoot, 1983; Meier, 1995).

[12] To see what these materials are like and get a feel for their potential as tools in transforming teaching and learning, see Gallery of Teaching and Learning sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/).