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Building a Professional Learning Community for Teachers of Hebrew

by Wallace Greene

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) occur wherever there are educators who are reflective practitioners. Whenever teachers engage in analyzing the why and how of what they do, and whenever this is done collegially -- whether formally or informally -- a PLC is said to exist. We are familiar with PLCs that are part of the old guild system in which there were apprentices learning from journeymen and artisans. The same can be said about quality internships and student teaching programs. The disconnect occurs in schools where there is no systemic or systematic professional development. One-day seminars are practically worthless and schools traditionally do not invest adequate resources to grow a PLC. Much of what is called professional development (*sic*) in the U.S. takes place because the calendar dictates a secular holiday or observance. It takes a great deal of ruthless determination, truly dedicated professionals, and targeted energy to develop and maintain a PLC in a school with teachers from varying academic disciplines and disparate backgrounds. We shall describe a community-based instructional program that has created and fostered a PLC.

Jewish Educational Services of the UJA of Northern New Jersey (JES) received a grant from The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture to elevate the teaching of Hebrew in our community. In order to do this, we needed not only to create a new approach and new teaching materials *ex nihilo*, but also to create a PLC. We shall limit our observations here to the development of a PLC of teachers of Hebrew in fifteen schools.

Hebrew Language Project Prologue

Hebrew is the irreplaceable language of Jewish life and expression. The revival of Hebrew in the last century-and-a-half is as singular a feat as the creation of the Jewish State. Hebrew has been wholly transformed from an unwieldy classical medium of liturgy and learning into a modern Western language. In a Jewish world of sundry and proliferating divisions, Hebrew must emerge as the common and unifying language of the Jewish people. The natural bonds of language and culture bind more firmly than those of abstruse ideological constructs.

Hebrew literacy has seriously declined as a result of American Jewry's accelerating integration into American life. Jewish peoplehood is achieved by the transmission of our collective memory and culture, rooted in our common language, literature and values. Lacking a common language means we also lack a common vocabulary, not only of words, but also of values, norms and ideals. Thus, there are compelling national and ideological reasons to undertake a comprehensive program for the propagation of Hebrew.

The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, at its 40th anniversary meeting in Jerusalem in 2004, decided to launch a bold and innovative pilot program in the United States to address this issue. The focus of the program is primarily on Hebrew as a portal to Jewish culture, literacy, and

Jewish text. The project is planned to cover Hebrew in pre-school programs, day schools, summer camps, and synagogues over a period of several years. Northern New Jersey was selected as the model community. The presence of this program in one community, with buy-in from the schools, is producing a synergy between the discrete programs that will amplify the cultural vitality of the program as a whole, and be more effective than a program dispersed geographically. This program can be replicated in other communities in the United States and elsewhere in the Diaspora.

The fundamental conceptual basis of this innovative pilot program is attempting to change the culture regarding Hebrew in the community -- in the first instance, the culture regarding Hebrew in Jewish pre-schools, day schools, and synagogue schools. Should we succeed in changing the culture about Hebrew in the educational system, we will have taken a major step towards helping trigger change in other communal institutions as well (camps, synagogues, universities, JCCs, etc.), the second stage of this very long-range program.

The initial phase of the program entailed working in close contact and cooperation with the directors of early childhood programs and principals. We needed to first ascertain their perception of the role of Hebrew in their schools and then, hopefully, assist them in enlarging their perception of the possibilities for expanding and intensifying the propagation of Hebrew in their schools. Northern New Jersey was selected as the pilot program due to its strong day schools, high level of support, study and travel to Israel, and the high leadership quality of its Jewish education professionals.

The Issue

The need to elevate Hebrew as a portal to Jewish life and culture in our educational systems is a well-documented and essential desire. The *status quo* is woefully inadequate, as are the limited efforts to ameliorate the situation. What complicates things even more is that many educational institutions do not seem to value Hebrew as a tool, nor (with a few notable exceptions) do they make any sincere or educationally valid efforts to offer instruction in it. When pressed, schools will reluctantly acknowledge that Hebrew is important, but add that there are many constraints, such as the lack of properly trained and/or knowledgeable teachers, too few hours available, and the unwillingness to sacrifice content on the altar of Hebrew literacy. There may be *Ivrit B'Ivrit* taking place in the primary grades, but there is no real understanding of the learning process involved or of the component pedagogic principles. Pre-packaged programs/texts are utilized. Where it exists, it is school based, not community-wide, and teachers rarely if ever meet to discuss techniques or strategies. It falters and disappears in the middle grades and in high school.

The Plan

The first challenge was getting principals and early childhood directors to agree to participate in this initiative. The issue of Hebrew language instruction and literacy is quite broad. Even native Hebrew speakers were observed teaching Hebrew in English! We needed to come up with a new approach to a serious problem, so we created a learning process that from the very beginning engenders positive attitudes towards Hebrew, its culture, and its speakers, as well as a fondness and sympathy for the language as a national value.

The success of this initiative is due directly to the creation of a PLC with those who teach Hebrew, once "the method" was unveiled. After considerable thought and research, we developed a two-pronged approach based on teaching Hebrew as a second language and utilizing brain research about how young children learn. Since this is the child's first encounter with the language, it serves as its "shop window." The more the encounter is embedded in a positive experience of enjoyment, involvement, interest, self-expression, and a sense of success, the greater the chance of its having a positive effect on the learner's attitude towards Hebrew in the future. Encouraging a positive attitude towards Hebrew is particularly important precisely because Hebrew is not merely a language tool, but is also a means of acculturation into Jewish culture that can make the child feel "at home" in that sphere.

Studies have shown that the earlier a child starts a second language (in this case, Hebrew), the more opportunities there will be to use this knowledge and strengthen it with formal and informal learning. Early childhood is suitable for the acquisition of Hebrew due to the way a child learns. There is a natural reference to the language and its use to communicate, with no need for rational explanations. There is no fear of implementation, and there is a readiness to take risks and make mistakes. (The detailed pedagogy of this program will be the subject of another article.) Children as young as three years old are exposed to spoken Hebrew, so that by the time they reach first grade, Hebrew will not be a barrier to instruction.

We visited many schools and presented our ideas to teachers and principals. Good teachers realize a good thing when they see it. Brain research and second language acquisition skills are really *alef-bet* when it comes to teaching Hebrew. Additional factors that helped create not only a PLC, but also a real *chevre* in fifteen schools, were the electric personality of the Project Director, Shoshana Glatzer, a veteran master pedagogue, stipends paid to participating teachers, ongoing seminars, mentoring, classroom observations, and frequent meetings of all the teachers.

Teachers represent every elementary day school in Northern New Jersey, the JCC, and several congregational schools. Some are native speakers, some are very fluent in Hebrew, and some are less fluent. What draws them together is the logic of our approach and the excitement of being part of a PLC where sharing is encouraged and peer learning is promoted as a value.

There are three different teaching modules/approaches and they all work! Success breeds enthusiasm to excel and the willingness to participate with others in a PLC. Modestly-dressed Orthodox teachers and jean-clad secular Israelis work together to learn, grow, and become better at what they do via our PLC. In addition to the supervision we provide, and the workshops that are mandatory during the summer, we offer free tuition for our local *Ulpan* and we also send teachers to Ulpan Akiva and other institutions in Israel (via supplemental grant funding). There are also visits and sessions with outstanding Israeli teachers. The schools recognize the value of these training sessions and provide the necessary 2-3 days off during the school year so the teachers can participate.

The PLC concept works here because we have an exceptional product, and we take seriously the practical observations of those in the field who implement the program. There is give and take between teachers and instructors, and often the suggestions wind up as accepted procedure. There is mutual respect, and there is respect for the process of the PLC.

The Professional Learning Community

A Professional Learning Community exists among all the teachers in the program because the principles of Action Research form a key element of this fraternal network of reflective educators. There is disciplined inquiry that impacts directly on a teacher's practice and empowers him or her to renew classrooms and promote instructional improvement.¹ There is much self-reflective inquiry.² There exists a systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by the participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions.³ There is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. And the primary goal is to assist the teacher in improving and/or refining his or her actions.⁴

We agree with Sirotnik⁵ and Joyce⁵ that an Action Research-based PLC is a process that develops a problem-solving ethos. Sagor⁶ identifies three purposes for Action Research: building the reflective practitioner, making progress on school-wide priorities, and building a professional culture in the educational arena. Each of these outcomes helps create an environment of learning and progress toward educational goals, and as a result they have become the focus of many school-based activities.

What makes this PLC work so well are the opportunities for teachers to learn from each other within the diverse professional and personal approaches that each represents. The two-

way feedback after each observation, and frequent meetings with small and large groups as well as the whole group, contribute to its success.

Our PLC has impacted many veteran teachers who now realize that there is a *hochma* (wisdom) to what they may have been doing intuitively. It also allows less experienced teachers with fewer mistakes to un-learn, to grow under the tutelage of master educators. Kudos to Shoshana Glatzer for making it happen.

We have learned that with the proper motivation, encouragement, supportive environment, resources, and tools, any group of teachers can become a Professional Learning Community. The Hebrew language experiment will soon start its third year of a projected ten-year development period.

Endnotes:

1. Jeffrey Glanz and Susan Sullivan. *Building Effective Learning Communities: Strategies for Leadership, Learning, & Collaboration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005.
2. Kemmis, S. and R. McTaggart. *The Action Research Planner* (3rd ed.). Geelong, Victoria, Australia: Deakin University, 1988.
3. Ebbutt, D. *Educational Action Research: Some general concerns and specific quibbles*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Institute of Education, 1983.
4. Sagor, Richard. *Guiding School Improvement through Action Research*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2000.
5. Sirotnik, K. A. "Evaluation in the Ecology of Schooling." in *The Ecology of School Renewal: The Eighty-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, edited by J. Goodlad. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987; Joyce, B. R. "Doors to School Improvement" in *Educational Leadership*, vol. 48, issue 8: pp. 59-62, 1991.
6. Sagor, op cit.

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