

Predicting the Future is Nothing to Joke About Maury Greenberg

There is an old joke that tells of three professionals from the 1930's who travel in time and suddenly find themselves walking our streets today. To make a long story shorter, of these three professionals only the teacher can walk into her workplace and immediately feel comfortable enough to carry on with her normal duties and routines.

While it may be comforting to consider that we have much in common with our colleagues of years gone by, this joke strikes a sour note for a number of reasons. Education has changed a great deal since the 1930's. Talk of multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, meeting the needs of individual students, and integrating the arts across the curriculum reverberates through the halls of our schools. It is ironic, though, that despite these tremendous changes, a teacher from the 1930's who suddenly appeared on our streets today *would* feel right at home in our classrooms today.

In *Megillat Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)* we read: "There is nothing new beneath the sun" (*Ecclesiastes 1:9*). Jewish educators can be proud of our heritage that instituted *hevruta* study as the community norm long before any books on cooperative learning appeared on our shelves. We can also read with pride the talmudic stories that highlight our rabbis' interest in meeting the educational needs of the young and old, the rich and poor, the scholars and those who didn't even know how to ask, long before talk of multiple intelligences and special needs education became common practice.

However, the fact of the matter is that the field of education has and will continue to change. Our beloved teacher from the 1930's will begin to feel edgy when she attends her school's opening workshop entitled, "*Tefilla*: Tapping Into Our Spiritual Side Through Prayer and Meditation." She will be in for quite a shock when meeting her first set of same sex parents, and she will become completely befuddled when she receives her first paycheck. ("So much money! I can't believe they deducted that amount for taxes!")

And, while predicting the future is an activity that is proscribed in our tradition to certifiable prophets, we can and must identify current trends, challenges, opportunities, and threats, and then plan accordingly.

A quick scan of educational and Jewish communal journals uncovers four strong trends that have the potential to bring dramatic changes to our profession: technological advances, the movement toward inclusion, teacher shortages, and the double-edged sword of increased funding and accountability.

TECHNOLOGY TREND

Technology is changing our world rapidly. Information is no longer concentrated in the hands of key institutions (e.g., the schools, the big three television networks, religious institutions), but is freely available through a variety of media channels. Advances in electronics, computers, and computer-related industries have placed powerful creation, manipulation, storage, and telecommunications devices in the hands of the general public.

The students in our schools are the first to grow up surrounded by home computers, video games, CD-ROMs, and high-speed access to the Internet. For the most part, Jewish educational professionals are so far behind the technology learning curve that we cannot ever hope to assume our familiar role as experts in this arena while our students play their customary role as disciples. What we need to do is reorient the entrenched educational model, found in most classroom settings, of from "sage on the stage" to "partners in learning." Teachers are the content experts, with experience in assessing learners' needs and designing learning environments that best suit those needs. Students are the technology experts, with experience in finding, manipulating, and exchanging electronic information. Rather than run from this unusual situation, let's use it to our advantage. Teachers in workshops I've facilitated are reporting that students are more motivated to learn when they get an opportunity to teach the teacher. It's a win-win situation. We must also take serious steps to educate ourselves technologically, wisely

integrate technology into our curricula, and share our successes and, yes, even our flops. The [JESNA web site](#) has developed an Electronic Toolkit area to facilitate this discussion.

Jewish educational professionals must ensure a bright future for our students by taking steps today to build technologically enhanced, compelling Jewish learning environments. Doing otherwise will send a message that Jewish education is mired in the past.

BRAIN RESEARCH

Advances in magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs) are leading to an explosion in brain research. This new research is beginning to give us a better understanding of how we learn, while shattering existing educational paradigms. In his book *Brain-Based Learning*, Eric Jensen explains that "Learning is all multi-processing—the learner is immersed in sensory input and the brain makes meaning out of it."¹ Our brains learn best when we *simultaneously* experience learning with all of our five senses. Textbooks and teacher guides may be a teacher's best friend, and they certainly have their place in our schools, but they cannot hope to achieve the mental stimulation provided by authentic, multi-sensory activities—the Pesach Seder being a perfect example of this type of rich learning experience. (Author's Note: This should not be construed as a position advocating for more model *Sedarim*, but for the type of learning they represent.)

Medical researchers also point out that each brain develops at its own rate. This may be an important factor in helping us to understand why Yossi can't read Hebrew. We cannot rule out the possibility that Yossi may have special needs, but it would be equally wrong to rule out the possibility that he is a perfectly normal child who is not neurologically ready to read. We must also ask ourselves if we have crafted enough multi-sensory, pre-reading activities to nurture the proper neurological framework for successful reading.

INCLUSION TREND

In a recent Hanukat CAJE article, "Toward an Inclusive K'lal Yisrael: What's Reasonable?", Sara Rubinow Simon and Ellen Fishman remind us that every student is unique and deserving of *kavod* (respect).² The authors did a wonderful job outlining the ethical, religious, and legal imperatives for meeting the needs of every child in our school systems.

It is not my intention here to summarize the article, but to respond as an educator with an eye toward the future. Talking about inclusive schools and being mindful of the verse "Educate every child according to his way" (*Proverbs 22:6*) is one thing. Actually meeting the needs of *all* students as described in the revised 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a staggering undertaking. One ramification of this piece of legislation is that more parents now want to have their children placed in day and religious school classrooms. And we are not ready! We must broaden our current understanding of "special needs" education to include all students. More ongoing professional development opportunities are needed to educate teachers about the range of learners and provide guidance in crafting lessons that serve the needs of all students. More classroom assistants are needed to help support these new learning environments. More educational publishers need to write curricula that put into practice what is known about multiple intelligences. This is fundamentally about good teaching—well-trained teachers, who recognize individual differences, maximizing the potential of every student. Significant dollar amounts will be needed to do the job right—dollars that are not even in the pipeline.

This is an educational agenda that cries out for some attention. We would do well to begin addressing it in a proactive manner.

TEACHER SHORTAGE TREND

There is a growing teacher shortage in North America, and the problem isn't limited to the sphere of Jewish
www.caje.org/learn/a_greenberg.htm

education. The staff at *Teacher Magazine* (March 2000)³ compiled a report on the looming teacher crisis facing our educational system, as a large segment of the teaching population approaches retirement age. Accounts of hiring uncertified teachers, stories of first-year teachers who leave in frustration, and reports of the inability of rural school districts to attract any teachers pervaded the issue. While these themes have been commonplace in Jewish education for some time now, the full impact of this worsening situation will hit our system hard. In many cases, certified teachers are the lifeblood of our day and religious schools. If the trends reported in *Teacher Magazine* continue, more public school districts will be forced to raise salaries to attract candidates from a shrinking talent pool. Jewish day schools which are not planning now for this possible scenario could find themselves reminiscing about the "good old days" when finding a full complement of teachers was difficult, but not impossible. A teacher shortage would be no less devastating for religious schools who see trained teachers, with or without Judaic content background, as a better option than avocational teachers.

While this particular trend is not new to Jewish educational professionals, it is imperative that we consider more "out-of-the-box" ideas as soon as possible. Less conventional education projects are beginning to take root, and they are deserving of our attention and consideration.

A number of institutions of higher learning across North America (among them the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew College, and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies) and Jskyway.com, an exciting, new on-line learning project, are beginning to offer professional development courses on line. Whether offered via the World Wide Web or through video conferencing, these courses share the goal of enhancing professional practice through access to experts who bring new approaches to our work. Current research suggests that such on-line courses are not everyone's cup of tea. High levels of self-discipline are linked to success, especially in web-based courses. But those students who thrive on-line give this medium high marks in terms of personal interaction with the instructor and previously unheard of scheduling flexibility. On-line professional development is not a "silver bullet" that will bring new teachers flocking to our schools. It may, however, serve as an outreach vehicle to a new generation of teachers who find this approach appealing, contemporary, and convenient.

In addition to their work in professional development, some of the institutions mentioned are also developing on-line courses for high school students. These courses are high-quality offerings, led by accomplished instructors. Educational leaders should begin to consider seriously whether such on-line courses should be incorporated into the scope and sequence of their school's curriculum. While the goal of these courses is to provide students with expert instruction, in certain situations such offerings may be helpful in compensating for staffing vacancies.

Team teaching is a model with a good track record in the educational field that should become more widespread in our system. Why consider this model when many schools find it difficult to fill their current teaching positions? The reason is that recruitment is only one factor in the teacher shortage equation. Teacher retention is an equally serious problem. There is a small but significant group of serious, committed teachers who are lost every year due to teacher burn-out. Some of these teachers may jump at the opportunity to continue under the right team teaching arrangement. First-year teachers are prime candidates for such assignments. Currently, those novices who succeed often do so owing more to their creativity and energy than to the guidance and training they receive from overburdened principals. Team teaching would help more of these novices gradually to build their skills, until they are confident and ready to take an individual assignment. The suggestion offered here is clearly a hard pill to swallow in the short term, but it may be the correct remedy for the staffing headache we are facing now and will continue to face in the future.

FUNDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY TREND

There is an unprecedented amount of money streaming into Jewish education initiatives. The interest of powerful and influential funders has led to new positions in the field, higher quality professional development opportunities, vibrant family and informal education offerings, widespread support for educational trips to Israel, and increases in salaries. We welcome this support and pray for the continued wisdom, success, and health of these funders.

We must also accept that the current situation brings with it new partnerships and, dare we admit, strings. Evan Mendelson, the Executive Director of the Jewish Funders Network, minces no words in bringing the outlines of this new relationship into focus. "Where is the money for research, evaluation, and needs assessment? Where is the

adequate staffing to provide...due diligence for all those participatory funds and supporting foundations? Where is the value that should be placed on accountability and clear goals and outcomes for beneficiary agencies rather than longevity?"⁴ Funders are highly intelligent, committed community leaders who want a significant say in how their money is being spent and who want evaluations indicating that their money has made an impact on the causes they support. This situation is healthy and proper.

Being beneficiaries of this largess, however, does not make us junior partners. In fact, Jewish educators should take a more proactive role in shaping this relationship before the relationship is shaped for us. We bring to the partnership educational information that is crucial to the success of the ongoing strategic planning initiatives nationwide. As a profession, however, we are weak in bringing to the table solid information highlighting the impact of our work. The funders are increasingly demanding this type of information, and we must be forthcoming.

To do so, we need to gear up our evaluation efforts at the classroom, school, and community levels. Solid research in "what works in Jewish education" is spotty and poorly disseminated. Members of the Network for Research in Jewish Education are taking an important first step in this direction. Through publications and annual conferences, the network is working to increase "the visibility of Jewish educational research and to create an environment that supports educational research and its use by Jewish educators and education policy makers."⁵ It behooves us to join this effort, learn the terminology, and contribute to the dialogue in meaningful ways. [For further information, contact The Network for Research in Jewish Education c/o JESNA, 111 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10011-5201.

CONCLUSION

CAJE was founded with the belief that Jewish education is important to Jewish life, that Jewish educators stand in the forefront of this sacred endeavor, that we can and must learn from one another, and that Jewish educators have a vital role in shaping the community agenda. This belief, however, did not originate with the founders of CAJE. It is a legacy passed down from our colleague from the 1930's who, in turn, received it as a legacy from her mentors.

Looking to our past, staying grounded in our present, and planning for these future trends is a timely stance—one that we would be wise to leave as our legacy.

Maury Greenberg is the Director of Technology Resources and Jewish Educator Services Program Coordinator at the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland. He is also a member of the CyberCAJE committee. He has experience leading schools in improvement projects with special attention to integration of technology into the learning process, teacher education, and curriculum development and implementation. He is a past Melton Scholar Educator and Covenant Fellow.

(Author's note: My thanks to my colleagues at the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies who willingly shared their expertise and dreams)

FOOTNOTES

1. Jensen, Eric, *Brain-Based Learning*, Turning Point Publishing, Del Mar, CA, 1996, p. 10.
2. Simon, Sara Rubinow and Fishman, Ellen, "Toward an Inclusive K'lal Yisrael: What's Reasonable?" CAJE, NY, 2000.
3. Available on-line at <http://www.teachermagazine.org/sreports/help.htm>
4. Mendelson, Evan, "The Funder's Perspective" in *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*, Vol. 76, No. 1 and 2, Fall/Winter, 1999, p. 78.

3/9/2009

JEN Summer 2000- Maury Greenberg ...

5. Zeldin, Michael and Schachter, Lifsa, "Research and Connoisseurship: An Invitation to Join the Conversation," in *Journal of Jewish Education*, Volume 65, No. 1 and 2, Spring/Summer, 1999, p.4