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# Transforming Jewish Education

## Transforming Jewish Teaching: A Necessary Condition for Transforming Jewish Schools

Gail Zaiman Dorph

**I**n 1993, the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE)<sup>1</sup> conducted a study of educators in pre-schools, congregational schools and day schools in the communities of Atlanta, Baltimore and Milwaukee. This study showed that although the teaching force is underprepared in both Judaica and pedagogy, it is more stable and more committed than we might have imagined. Although only 32% of the teaching force is full-time, about 60% considers Jewish education to be a career. Only 6% of teachers plan to seek positions outside of Jewish education in the near future.<sup>2</sup>

Conventional wisdom has stressed the futility of investing in our teachers, since most of them are part-time and not professionals by training. CIJE's findings suggest that investing in the present teaching and leadership workforce could have real benefits for the Jewish community. These data have led us at CIJE to rethink the area of professional development. Over the last few months, CIJE has been working both in communities and nationally to create strategies for developing serious approaches to professional development opportunities for teachers

and educational leaders. This article describes an emergent approach to professional development grounded in a particular view of teaching and learning. The thinking upon which it is based is guiding CIJE's current work in professional development.

In both Jewish and general education, the dominant approach to in-service education for teachers has taken the form of one-shot workshops, or, at best, short-term passive activities, with limited follow-up. The content of in-service education has emphasized a "one size fits all approach," assuming that generic strategies are applicable to all regardless of educational setting, age of the learner, or subject matter to be taught and learned. Such strategies assume that each teacher would "learn" the latest new techniques and creative activities and bring them back to her/his own classroom, making whatever "adjustments" might be necessary.

This approach to professional development grew out of a particular view of teaching. In this view, teaching is considered to be straightforward and non-problematic; it emphasizes teachers transmitting information and children listening and remembering. It does not seriously address either the needs of children as learners or the subject matters to be taught. Our approach to professional development has been influenced by a different view of teaching and learning, one that emphasizes respect for both learner and subject matter. Such teaching has often been characterized as "teaching for understanding" (Cohen, McLaughlin, and Talbert, 1993). This view of teaching moves us away from a



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more traditional image of teaching as "telling and learning as listening" to a vision of practice referred to by Deborah Meier (quoted in Little, 1993) as "learning as telling, teaching as listening."

This conception of teaching requires that we think differently about what teachers need to know and be able to do, and therefore requires that we think differently about the contexts and content of professional development. If we are to take seriously issues of learners and subject matter, "one size" can no longer fit all; generic techniques appropriate to all ages and subjects will be inadequate to the task. We will need to create a variety of new strategies and supports to enhance and deepen teachers' learning and guide them through experimentation and the real struggles that accompany change. Professional development must itself reflect, promote and support the kind of teaching and learning that we hope to foster.

Researchers concerned with the latest efforts in educational reform have found that teachers have been able to make significant changes in their teaching practices in the context of learning communities. In such communities, the emphasis switches

from experts transmitting skills to teachers studying the teaching and learning processes (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Little, 1993; Lord, 1994; McLaughlin, Talbert, 1993). Teachers have opportunities to voice and share successes and exemplars, doubts and frustrations. They learn to raise concerns and critical questions about their own teaching and about their colleagues' teaching.

As Judith Warren Little (1993) has suggested, changing teaching will require not only changing our image of teachers' work but also developing a culture compatible with the image of teacher as "intellectual" rather than teacher as "technician." Professional development as an essential and indispensable process will need to be integrated into the life of educational institutions, woven into the very fabric of teachers' work, not seen as a "frill" that can be cut in difficult financial times or because of overprogrammed schedules.

A variety of conditions (McDiarmid, 1994) have been singled out as critical for supporting this new approach to professional development. These conditions suggest a need for creating opportunities and structural regularities that do not

presently exist in most Jewish or general educational settings.

I would like to present three of these conditions because of their implications for Jewish education:

1. Teachers need opportunities to work with colleagues, both in their school building and beyond it. They need to be part of larger learning communities that provide support and access to new ideas and knowledge.
2. Teachers need time to become involved in the sometimes protracted process of changing roles and practice. To attain time and mental space, professional development must be redefined as a central part of teaching. It can no longer be an "add-on," tacked on to the school day, week or year. It must be woven into teachers' daily work.
3. Teachers need the support and advice of an educational leader who understands issues of teaching and learning and what it takes to change teachers' roles and practice in their classrooms and in the school.

Let me address these three conditions and the challenges they pose to us.



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## 1. Critical Collegueship

Making changes is hard work. Change does not always go smoothly. It often includes frustration, backsliding and failure. Making changes in one's teaching practice is no exception. When stressing the challenges of changing one's teaching practice, Deborah Meier has suggested the analogy of "changing a tire on a moving vehicle," an analogy that speaks to the difficulty one encounters as one continues "to move" while engaged in repair work. After all, professional development is not a pre-service activity. It takes place in the same time frame in which one is engaged in "doing the work."

Educational research (Lord, 1994; McLaughlin, Talbert, 1993) indicates that teachers who have made effective changes in their practice belong to active professional communities that not only support and encourage new practice but also enable teachers to engage in constructive criticism. A logical place to develop such colleagueship is within the context of the school in which one is teaching. Here, teachers can develop ways of working and talking together. But we also need ways to create community for teachers beyond their own schools so that teachers of the same subject matters and teach-

ers of the same age children can learn together.

Transforming schools into learning communities for faculty as well as for students sounds like a reasonable suggestion—and yet, it is a formidable challenge. Critical colleagueship among teachers could indeed be the first step. Two clear prerequisites to meaningful collegial collaboration are time and the involvement and support of the educational leadership of the institution.

## 2. Time

When the rhetoric of changing teaching practice meets the reality of life in schools, it immediately collides with the problem of time. If this is true in general education, how much more so is it true in Jewish education, where the majority of our institutions and our personnel function part-time. It is hard to imagine how time can be found in the current work configuration. Even finding time for staff meetings when all players can be present is difficult; it is all the more challenging to find real time to learn, discuss and reflect.

In general education, schools with serious commitment to professional development for their teachers have experimented with

a number of different strategies for finding regular time including a weekly extended lunch time of two hours; pre-school meetings; and starting "regular classes" at noon once a week.

What would it take to find regular time in our Jewish schools? Day schools and pre-schools might experiment with strategies such as those suggested above. In supplementary schools, where there is no flexibility in manipulating face-to-face contact hours of teachers with students, it might mean paying teachers for an extra afternoon of time each week or for an additional two hours on Sunday.

## 3. Leadership

It is clear that reorganizing the schedule of a school to accommodate this kind of professional development requires the support of the leader of an educational enterprise. This support cannot be present only in the form of lip service and superficial restructuring moves. Only in settings where principals are involved in professional development does teaching practice really change (Little, 1989). At the most straightforward level, educational leaders need to value this enterprise; initiate, plan, develop and evaluate initiatives in their own institutions; work with their teachers to develop appropriate individual professional development plans; and work to advocate for particular programs that might best be offered at the communal level, such as those that extend and deepen teachers' subject matter knowledge.

## Community Mobilization

An additional necessary condition for serious professional



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development for Jewish educators falls under the rubric of community mobilization. If one thinks about the three conditions necessary for creating a serious climate for professional development, one is struck by the implications not only for the people—teachers and principals—but also for their roles and their institutions. Building professional development into schools requires rethinking school schedules and allocation of teachers' time and salaries. None of this can be accomplished without the support of school board members, rabbis and other stakeholders in the process. Thus, taking professional development seriously challenges us to address three much more basic issues:

Do we believe that Jewish education can make a difference?

Do we believe that Jewish educators are critical to making that difference?

Are we willing to create the conditions and supports that reflect our beliefs in a serious way?

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## Notes

- 1 Created in 1990 by the Commission on Jewish Education in North America, CIJE is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to the revitalization of Jewish education. CIJE's mission, its projects and research, is to be a catalyst for systemic educational reform by working in partnership with Jewish communities and institutions to build the profession of Jewish education and mobilize community support for Jewish education.
2. For more information about the Study of Educators, please contact the CIJE office, 15 E. 26th Street, New York, NY 10010; 212-532-2360; fax number 212-532-2646.

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