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CIJE PROFESSORS SEMINAR: PARTICIPANT REACTIONS
MAY, 1998

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This report describes participant reactions to the CIJE Professors Seminar (PS) along with specific suggestions as to the shape and content of its future work. Eighteen interviews, most by phone, were conducted with all members of the seminar who had attended at least one PS meeting. An interview guide was followed (See Appendix 1). I carried out interviews which lasted approximately 30 minutes. In addition, I had a brief discussion with two professors who, though interested, have not yet attended a PS meeting.

Overview

Without exception, the professors reported a very positive response to the PS. Among the highlights were the text study component of PS, the shared Shabbat experience, and the high quality of the group members, and visiting scholars and teachers. Cutting through many interviews was enormous admiration and respect for CIJE coordinators as organizers of the seminar but also as learned teachers who can make ideas accessible to all. A number of suggestions were made with respect to how to use the time in PS more effectively to advance CIJE projects and the CIJE agenda. Suggestions also related to making better use of the expertise members bring to the PS. Locating an additional seminar meeting in Israel was explored and received mixed reactions.

Looking ahead, several patterns of future involvement with PS and CIJE projects seem likely. Some individuals intend to stay active with the PS and involved with CIJE projects. For other members, participation in the PS will be their main connection to CIJE with occasional, limited involvement in CIJE work. Others would like to become more involved in CIJE work if an appropriate match of expertise and need can be made. Some members who have taken more responsibility for CIJE projects, may find full attendance at the PS difficult, but participation is highly valued. For others, family and job obligations may make it highly unlikely that they can attend meetings in the near future, but their interest in participation is still strong. Certain considerations regarding the timing and location of the PS meetings might address these problems.

Why members joined PS

We reminded participants that two of the reasons for creating the PS were to provide a setting in which Jewish professors of general education could have personally meaningful experiences with Jewish learning, and as a mechanism through which to increase professional capacity in the field of Jewish education.

In explaining why they joined PS, participants expressed a variety of motivations including the two stated above. A number of professors were already involved with CIJE in active consultant roles and these individuals tend to be rather knowledgeable Jewishly. As a matter of emphasis, for some in this group the PS offered the opportunity for more learning in the company of other respected colleagues while others stressed the importance of having a community of scholars with whom to address CIJE work, obtain feedback, and from which to recruit colleagues to be engaged in CIJE projects.

Some professors who had not previously been involved with CIJE were intrigued with the possibility of learning more (or something) about Jewish culture, texts, and Jewish education. Members with little Jewish background were pleased their lack of knowledge did not pose a barrier to participation. The fact that learning occurred in a "Jewishly comfortable" setting with other Jews from one's professional world was also appealing. In addition, some individuals were most drawn to the opportunity to be of use, to reactivate their dormant involvement in Jewish education, and to bridge their general education work with Jewish education. A few saw the PS connection as a possible source of new professional activity.

Personal connections were also a prominent source of motivation for joining. Many members spoke of prior personal (positive) contacts with CIJE staff and consultants and respect for both individuals at CIJE and its mission. Recruiting efforts on the part of CIJE staff were evident. As one member said, "Barry finally twisted my arm into coming." Another noted that after a breakfast with Gail, he wanted to become involved. And a third indicated she had known Alan for a lot of years. Sharon was also mentioned as a person who interested a number of members in PS.

The social-intellectual potential of the PS was another source of motivation. A number of members indicated that the people sounded "like an interesting, fun group" and consisted of individuals they respected from the field of general education. Getting to know colleagues better and being with a group of Jewish professionals who were interested in education also held considerable appeal. For those recruited after the seminar in Israel, the high marks the seminar received also came into play.

Reactions to the Seminar Meetings

Three meetings of the PS have taken place. The first in Israel during July, 1996 had x professors and lasted approximately 15? days. A four day meeting in Florida in January, 1997 was followed by a four day meeting in Princeton in June, 1997. A planned meeting for January, 1998 was cancelled because too few members could attend due to conflicts and illness. A seminar is planned for June, 1998. Given their differences in

individuals strengthen their Jewish identity. Almost everyone wanted to retain some sessions devoted to Jewish text study and to CIJE work. To be in Israel with a primary concern on education in America seemed problematic to some members.

Reactions to other seminars

Overall, the professors were enthusiastic about both the Florida and Princeton meetings. Again, text study with chavrutah was especially appreciated as was the chance to learn from Art Green. A number of participants felt that the Florida meeting incorporated some styles of working which could be expanded and used effectively in future meetings. Having members of the seminar break into small groups to consider issues on the indicators project was one example. Another was engaging with Deborah and her video approach.

Some members noted that it seemed beneficial that Moti and Melilah participated in all the sessions making it more likely that a bridge between the text study and other PS activities would occur. In contrast, some thought it was more difficult to make connections across sessions in Princeton and that the meeting, though highly stimulating, seemed more lecture-oriented across all session. Some individuals commented that Florida seemed to allow for more informal contact, including walking on the beach, than Princeton but others liked the Chauncy Center very much. Depending on their background and practice, some members found shabbat services interesting but unfamiliar while others were very much at home. Members who did not participate were not made uncomfortable about it.

How to work on CIJE's work

An on-going concern for CIJE coordinators of the PS and for its members is how best to accomplish work on CIJE projects or plans during the seminars and maximize use of the professors' expertise. We asked directly about these issues. All agreed that the seminars have been effective in helping PS members learn about on-going CIJE work--it has served an introductory function well. But more is desired.

A variety of suggestions were made. A number of people mentioned that professors could be asked to come prepared to work, collaborate, or discuss certain issues or projects. There is every reason to send out reading materials in advance and to explain what is to be accomplished face to face at PS. As much "getting up to speed" as possible could be accomplished in advance of PS. One member expressed a similar idea in suggesting that CIJE could expect members to come prepared as one would to an advisory board. (If a significant amount of time was needed, some kind of consultant fee could be arranged.)

A related idea in terms of advance preparation was the possibility of a conference call either to establish agenda

character, the Israel seminar will be discussed separately.

Israel

The most common description of the Israel seminar was "intense." The professors who went to Israel were very enthusiastic about the content and quality of the seminar, particularly the sessions involving Jewish learning and chavrutah. Most also found the focus on four scholars illuminating and highly relevant to CIJE's concerns with education. Participants were impressed with the overall conception of the seminar program and the fact that material was accessible to individuals with a broad range of backgrounds. People talked about the seminar as a "gift" and a "privilege" and were pleased to be in the "student" role in contrast to their usual one of teacher.

Other highlights included shabbat at the Hoffmans and the trip to the desert. High praise was also given to the members of the group and staff and the "community building" and friendships achieved.

Some of the seminar's strengths were also weaknesses. Most participants believed the Israel seminar was over-programmed, and contained too many sessions in a lecture-type format. A few noted some inconsistency between the espoused educational ideals of CIJE and the way the seminar was run. Concern was also expressed that insufficient time was allocated to Jewish education topics and CIJE's work, with the result that the professors' expertise may not have been adequately tapped. The very full schedule allowed little time for informal interactions and for contact with Israeli institutions and people. The question was raised, 'why was this seminar in Israel when the focus was on Jewish education and jewry in the U.S.?'

Participants had mixed reactions to the desirability of a future seminar in Israel. The main issue was its justification. While a number would like to go to Israel again, others would only consider traveling that distance if there were compelling reasons to be in Israel. There was almost universal agreement that any Israel seminar should be shorter--the suggested times ranged from 7-10 days, with one member opting for 4 days. There was also a call for some more free time but an appreciation of the tension between sacrificing program content to other purposes. One member suggested tying the seminar to other CIJE work in Israel, making it more time and cost effective.

The majority of suggestions focused on making much more use of the resources of Israel. Members suggested learning about Israeli schools, including visiting some, learning about the Israeli education system and finding out more about Jewish life in Israel. Personal contacts were also desired possibly with Israeli colleagues, among others. More time "in the field", possibly including visits to religious sites, might help some

and work plan for the PS or for a session on a particular topic. One member suggested that brief meetings elsewhere might also facilitate work on a given project. Again, the notion is that members can be more prepared to get right to work in this way. The suggestion also picks up on the idea that members, along with coordinators, can take some responsibility for planning the PS curriculum.

Another suggestion was to organize some sessions in small groups which at times might not tackle the same problem. While there is benefit in having all participants engage in all discussions, it was felt that generally the benefits of smaller groups working on a particular task were probably greater. One member suggested that we be given some kind of design task or a set of data to look at or other activities where real progress could be made. Another person suggested the creation of standing work groups such that each professor was affiliated with one (or more) project groups and time during PS was devoted to meetings of the work groups.

A variety of substantive suggestions were made for focal topics or issues that might draw on member expertise or lead to interesting dialogue in the group. These topics were suggested in addition to some time devoted to CIJE projects and agenda. The topics (in no particular order) included dialogues about intergroup relations; discussion of how professors of general education committed to pluralism and diversity negotiate involvement in Jewish education, and similarly, how Jewish education addresses societal pluralism. Similarly, consideration of issues surrounding the fact that most Jewish education is experienced side by side with public education. Examination of what may be unique about educating Jewishly and what the goals for Jewish education should be. Exploring the role of Hebrew in Jewish education. Exploring relationships between Jewish education and continuity. Examination of professional development, teacher learning and school reform in the context of Jewish education. Exploring how general teacher education confronts issues of values, and spirituality. Considering how the gap can be closed between academics, including members of PS, and those in Jewish education full time.

Logistics

Without going into detail about each professor's needs, some general responses emerged with respect to timing and location of future meetings. With respect to physical location, members appreciated that the settings used have been attractive and comfortable. But considerations of travel time definitely influence members' ability to attend. For persons on the west coast getting to Florida, for example, is extremely time consuming. A number of west coast members and "shadow" members suggested that a west coast site would facilitate their attendance. Ease of access from the airport is also desirable and a few people believed Princeton was too far. Some way to rotate

meetings in central locations seems most promising.

There are a number of professors with heavy family responsibilities associated with young children or other circumstances such as new jobs who find being away from home rather difficult. Some can get away for one or two nights but are hesitant to do more. Other members liked the 3-4 day meetings very much. Family stage is clearly a major consideration with respect to participation, as was evident in who was able to attend the Israel seminar.

For most, weekends including Shabbat are preferred although some would rather be with their families on Shabbat. The summer months seem to be the easiest time for many professors to attend PS. March-April is universally inconvenient. There may be some feasible times in December or January when intersessions occur, but academic calendars vary considerably at that time of year. Whatever plans are made it was urged that a lot of advance notice be provided. Meetings have been scheduled which conflict with other meetings such as the AERA Council. A list of possible conflicting meetings for the membership might be collected.

A focus on individual circumstances raises the issue of whether the optimal arrangement is for all members to be invited to all PS meetings. We have already discussed ways in which members could be divided to address certain tasks during the seminar. But at the level of the whole seminar program, is the group seen as arranged for "whole class learning" or might there be meetings structured for a subset? This question was raised in a number of forms. One member asked if PS is a seminar or an association? Another queried about the relationship between doing consultant work for CIJE and becoming a member of PS. Is it desirable (planned) to invite all professors who consult for CIJE to become seminar members? What criteria should come into play in a decision to offer membership? Is membership conceptualized as semi-permanent or is there an expectation of moving people through the PS and into other roles over time?

Should new members be invited?

There were mixed responses to adding new PS members. Most were open to the idea, but all were concerned that the group not become too large and that the excellent quality and commitment of the members be preserved. A number commented on the esprit among group members and a compatible non-combative style that was highly valued. Some thought new members should be added when there was a need for the person's expertise (e.g. early childhood). Others knew of specific individuals they thought could make a contribution to CIJE and the seminar (suggested names will be provided to coordinators). An answer to the question of adding more colleagues also hinges on the envisioned future structure of the seminar discussed in the previous paragraph. Just to make PS larger did not really appeal to anyone.

If new members are invited, we should explain the rationale for the seminar and provide a certain amount of written material describing CIJE and its work. Members of the PS who joined after initial meetings uniformly felt welcome, but some information gap was evident.

Some final thoughts

Participants have been especially enthusiastic about the Jewish learning sessions of PS. When time limitations are not an issue, most members want to contribute in professionally appropriate ways to CIJE projects. A handful feel guilty because they believe they are not doing enough for CIJE in light of their participation in PS. Without exception, all members want to attend future meetings, even though in some cases there may be an interval when their attendance is not possible.

A general concern is how to best use members' expertise viz CIJE while also keeping PS a forum in which more general issues can be examined and the "so what" questions can be raised. A number of suggestions were discussed, but this seems like a long-term challenge.

One member asked whether the curriculum for PS has actually been specified. Over time, it may be very helpful to think out a general scope for the PS and to be able to communicate it to members. At the same time, much of the PS activity probably has to be planned on a short-term ad lib basis. Members might be brought into the planning process more than in the past.

A number of examples of involvement with other Jewish education projects, not connected with CIJE, were cited by members. They reported a tie between their involvement in PS and new activities in Jewish education and synagogue settings. Some of the activities took place because a member of PS asked another member to join in. Evidence of networking and increased concern about Jewish education was in the interviews.

I sensed a number of individuals who felt rather unsure about expectations for PS members. Should they be working on projects, if not, should they continue to participate? To the extent desirable some clarification may be in order without specifying a formal path for all to follow.

In a separate memo, I will list persons who were named as possible new members of the seminar. I will also transmit participant reactions to the idea of individual or small group study at their home base. Last, I will inform Barry and Gail of some individual concerns and questions raised in the interviews.