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What Research Teaches About the Possibility of Reinventing Jewish Education

AMY L. SALES

In conducting evaluation research for Synagogue 2000, I asked hundreds of S2K team members, “What is the most important thing you learned about synagogue change?” By far, the most common answer was “change is hard.” The stakeholders to whom I reported my findings were not impressed. Having spent years developing and implementing the program, they were deeply familiar with the difficulty of change. What the research showed, however, was that those who were called upon to participate in making change *didn’t* know. In fact, they were stunned by the obstacles, “glacial” pace, and near impossibility of communicating the vision to those who were not directly involved.

Reinventing Jewish education is not about tinkering at the surface level but at creating deep change, a new paradigm. Superficial change is built on existing models, but deep change dramatically breaks with the past and challenges current models, norms, values, and beliefs. A paradigm shift is a radical move and, as many have discovered, it is extremely difficult to achieve. In terms of Jewish education, the call for a new paradigm involves not only the invention of new organizations, programs, and methods, but also profound change in existing organizations, people, communities, fields of practice, and systems. What follows are brief highlights of what the research teaches us about change in each of these domains.

CHANGING AN ORGANIZATION

Deep change within organizations is relatively rare. In our study of 24 synagogues that had made concerted efforts to fundamentally change congregational education, we found only 5 that were reaching their deep structure (Sales, Samuel, Koren, & Shain, 2010). At best, the others changed or supplemented their schedules and curricula but did so without changing

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the existing educational model or creating a new pedagogy or philosophy of education. It is easier to work on the surface level, manipulating concrete structures such as class schedules, teacher assignments, use of space, and the like. It is significantly more difficult to challenge deep-seated assumptions about education and to arrive at new beliefs about teaching and learning. It is not surprising that most change is of the surface-level variety.

The exception occurred in congregations that were able to think big, take risks, and move apace from planning to implementation. These congregations were more likely to become innovating organizations and, as a result, to set a virtuous spiral of positive change in motion. Radical change was also helped by an understanding of the difference between a new program and a new paradigm, a difference that other congregations appeared not to grasp.

CHANGING PEOPLE

The purpose of education is to affect people and their lives. In reinventing Jewish education, we need to consider whether proposed changes will yield this outcome. Innovators in Jewish education often fail to articulate their logic model and thus do not get intended results. Family education in Boston, for example, was a radically new idea. Its intent was to reinforce lessons learned at school by bringing Jewish practices into the home. Its method was to have parents accompany their children to the synagogue to learn together. The significant change we found in parental behaviors was not in home practices but in the number of hours parents spent in the synagogue each week (Sales, Koren, & Shevitz, 2002). Research repeatedly shows such links between inputs and outcomes, and suggests a need for careful examination of the theory of action underlying new programs emerging in Jewish education. Every program has an outcome, but what are the *intended* outcomes and how does the program achieve these?

CHANGING A COMMUNITY

The reinvention of Jewish education will require local organizations to pull together to bring about a paradigm shift. Our study of Jewish education in eight communities, however, revealed mindsets that challenge such collective action. For example, we invariably encountered competitive environments in which programs were loath to share information with one another let alone engage in cooperative action. We also found stark contrasts among communities in how education is conceptualized and delivered. These differences were driven by local culture, structure, funding patterns, leadership, and politics (Sales, 2007). For a new paradigm to become reality,

it will need to be customized within each setting and new ways of thinking about education in the community writ large will be needed.

CHANGING A FIELD

The oft-cited silos of Jewish education are perpetuated by the fact that various forms of Jewish education belong to fields of practice in the broader world of education. Day schools identify with the independent schools; overnight camps associate with the American Camp Association. Certification, professional development, and business practices are influenced more by the field than they are by the Jewish community. To the extent Jews have created parallel (or embedded) fields, these will need to be implicated in the reinvention of Jewish education.

The story of Jewish camp suggests that it is, in fact, possible to change a field. Between 2000 and 2008, Jewish camp underwent dramatic change (Sales, Samuel, & Boxer, 2011). Much of the change was on the surface level: improved facilities and significantly increased enrollments, fundraising, and staff development. At a deeper level, however, camps shifted their self-definition from summer programs to nonprofit organizations. Change was also evident in the community camps' embracing their role as Jewish educational institutions and in the development of decentralized and integrated educational programs throughout. Such changes touch the core of the camp and can be considered deep change.

Several forces ignited this change. One was the emergence of the Foundation for Jewish Camp under new leadership. A second was the support of key foundations. And a third was the camp research, which identified "missed opportunities" at the summer camps and offered a set of policy recommendations (Sales & Saxe, 2002). Change did not arise from the individual camps but was driven through them by the alignment of these forces and the press of the reality that the camps were facing.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM

The conditions of collective impact required for a paradigm shift (Kania & Kramer, 2011) currently do not hold in the Jewish community, but if we could achieve them, we would move closer to an educational *system*. One of these conditions is a shared measurement system.

At Brandeis University we have been working on JData, a collective information system for Jewish education. JData gathers census-like information on participants, staff, budgets, and governance. Such information forms an essential knowledge base for an educational system. It enables planners and programmers to gain an accurate picture of the size and shape of the

field, track enrollment and cost over time, compare population figures to enrollments, identify communities for expansion, and the like. It is a tool not only for creating an educational system but also for understanding and transforming it.

Building a shared information system presents significant challenges ranging from the technical to the political, the latter being by far the greatest obstruction. Although we find widespread appreciation for the concept at the communal and national level, local organizations are slow to share their data. As noted above, change is hard. Nonetheless, the reinvention of Jewish education will require reliable data on Jewish education, and achieving these data will require participation from across the system-in-formation.

CONCLUSION

To date, research has helped ferret out the factors that increase the likelihood of radical change in educational settings. It has identified the gaps between vision and practice and the dynamics within communities that call for unique responses. And research has ignited interest in a field and provoked action. Research can and should play an important role in understanding the current situation in Jewish education, analyzing the needs and possibilities for change nationally and locally, defining success, and measuring progress. Vision is greatly needed. But vision needs the weight of research behind it . . . and sometimes in front of it.

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