Teach them diligently to your children: An experiment in avocational teaching

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**Abstract**

This paper describes how the idea of avocational teaching took shape in one particular context. It begins with a brief institutional history and then outlines some of the decisions we made during the start-up phase of the project when we were inventing structures and shaping expectations. The heart of the paper is a discussion of five features that came to characterize the KI approach to avocational teaching and teacher development. The concluding section examines some lessons we learned about what it takes to sustain ongoing teacher development. These lessons go beyond concerns about avocational teaching to address broader issues of educational leadership and teacher learning. The paper draws on a rich archive of interviews, fieldnotes, and documents collected over a three-year period.

**INTRODUCTION**

Rabbi Judah the Prince sent Rabbi Dosa and Rabbi Amni to travel to all the cities in the land of Israel to inspect them. They came to one city and said to the people: "Let the watchmen of the city come here." They brought out the chief of the city guard and the sheriff. The rabbis said to them: "Are these the watchmen of the city? They are the destroyers of the city!" The people said to them: "And who are the watchmen of the city?" And the rabbis said to them: "They are the teachers of the Written Law and the teachers of the Oral Law, for they watch day and night, in keeping with the words:"Thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Joshua 1:8). *(Glatzer, 1962)*

In 1992, the Covenant Foundation of New York awarded a three-year grant to Congregation Kehillat Israel (KI) in Lansing, Michigan to design, implement, and disseminate an avocational teacher program. The project aimed to develop a corps of volunteer teachers (men and women) for the religious school and to create a structure for ongoing teacher recruitment and support. During the period of the grant, over thirty-five volunteers taught in the religious school or in the high school program. Since then,
more than a dozen people, some veterans of the project and some new recruits, have continued to teach in the religious school each year.

KI avocational teachers are congregants, mostly but not exclusively parents of children in the religious school. Many have limited backgrounds in Judaica and only a few have taught at the elementary, middle, or high school levels. The challenge for the project was to help these volunteers learn what they needed to know in order to experience satisfaction and achieve a reasonable level of success in the classroom. Often this meant helping them come to terms with their own Jewish attitudes, beliefs, and practices, for as Heshel (1966) explains:

> The teacher ... is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, the teacher must have been there himself. When asking: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I saw? the teacher must be able to answer in the affirmative. (237)

The Lansing avocational teacher project became a context for adult Jewish learning in the service of children's Jewish education. In any given week, up to ten avocational teachers might be studying the Torah and an equal number reading about Jewish holidays, medical ethics, or ideas about God because they were going to be teaching on Sunday. In all probability, these same people, busy with careers and families, would not have signed up for a weekly Torah study group or a class on one of these topics. But the responsibility to teach created an obligation to learn. For many, this Jewish study was not only a process of gaining new knowledge and understanding, but also an opportunity to rethink, even reconstruct, their Jewish identity (Wohl, 1997).

This paper describes how the idea of avocational teaching took shape in one particular context. Following a brief institutional history, I outline some of the decisions that we made during the startup phase of the project when we were inventing structures and shaping expectations. Next I discuss five features that came to characterize the KI approach to avocational teaching and teacher development. From our experiences we learned some important lessons about what it takes to sustain ongoing teacher development. In the concluding section, I identify three enabling conditions that go beyond concerns about avocational teaching. Throughout the paper, I draw on a rich archive of interviews, fieldnotes, and documents collected over a three year period.

**INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AND CONTEXT**

The Lansing avocational teaching project must be understood in the context of Kehillat Israel's origins as a participatory congregation and the state of affairs in the religious school in 1991 when we submitted a proposal to the Covenant Foundation. In many ways, this is a story about the fit between a generative idea (avocational teaching), a congregation at a particular moment in time, and some decisions about how to engage in avocational teaching.
Congregation Kehillat Israel was founded in 1971 by twenty families, including some with considerable Judaica background and skills, who wanted to provide a strong Jewish education for their children. After operating out of homes and various temporary quarters for almost a decade, the congregation bought an old public school building in Lansing to house its growing membership. The congregation intentionally had neither a rabbi nor educational director. Members took responsibility for leading weekly services, organizing the religious school, managing the building, creating holiday celebrations, arranging for adult education, and planning social and social action events.

During the 1980s, KI experienced changes in its membership, which made it more difficult to depend wholly on volunteerism. The small, relatively homogenous group that formed the congregation now included a more heterogenous mix with a significant number of intermarried couples. The preponderance of dual career families also meant that volunteers were harder to come by. The congregation of 125 families still maintained a full set of programs, but the same people were getting tired of holding things together and the limits of volunteerism without knowledgeable leadership was beginning to show in critical areas such as the religious school.

The religious school. The religious school of 65–70 children was run by a part-time administrator—an experienced teacher with little substantive Jewish background. Israelis and university students were hired to teach an hour of Hebrew and an hour of Judaica on Wednesday afternoon and Sunday morning. Based on the number of students, we combined two grade levels to form classes of 10–15 students. So in a given year we might have a K/1, 2, 3/4, 5/6, and a 7th grade. Most teachers had no strong ties to the community or congregation and turnover was high. Things were particularly problematic in the upper grades where the instructional program lacked substance and appeal and the teachers had difficulty earning students' respect. Classroom discipline suffered as students rebelled at the poor level and quality of instruction. Instead of strengthening students' Jewish identity, the school seemed to be having the opposite effect.

The congregation's morale was low and most sensed that something needed to change. At a series of informal gatherings initiated by the board of directors to discuss congregational needs and priorities, some parents discovered that others shared their concerns about the school. A group of parents with children in the fifth and sixth grades gradually coalesced around the goal of exploring ways to improve the school. Six parents took on the task of designing a new curriculum for the following year that would feature an exploration of Jewish communities, including the Lansing community, and a project-based study of tzedakah.

The Covenant proposal. Around the same time I learned of the Covenant Foundation's intention to fund innovative projects in Jewish education and saw a way to link up the parents' efforts with the idea of "avocational
teaching." The 5/6 grade parent group spent several meetings working out the details of our proposal. We decided that grant monies would be used for an outside consultant in Jewish education who would come three times a year to advise us on curriculum development and work with teachers, for someone local to manage the project, and for teacher retreats. Central to the program would be a mechanism for developing an initial cohort of avocational teachers who would help prepare a second cohort. To our delight, the proposal was funded. The news energized the congregation.

We decided to combine the funds allocated for a project manager with funds in the synagogue's budget for a part-time school administrator to create a 3/4 time position for an educational director. We recruited a recent graduate from the rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York who had a masters degree in Jewish education. This meant that, for the duration of the grant, we had a professional Jewish educator/rabbi on-site to provide leadership to the religious school and give substantive guidance to the avocational teachers. We had already contracted with Dr. Gail Dorph, a well-known expert in Jewish teacher education, to serve as our outside consultant.

**INVENTING A PLAN OF ACTION**

While the idea of avocational teaching was out in the world of Jewish education, concrete models for how to do it were in short supply. The only example we knew of had been described in an article by Isa Aron (1988) and further elaborated in a compilation of "best practices" in Jewish supplementary schools (Holtz 1992). Like KI, this reform congregation outside Toronto had a tradition of involvement and participation and placed a strong value on learning.

It also had a rabbi, educational director, and a school of 300 children. Basically the rabbi and educational director put together a year-long course on Sunday morning for potential congregant-teachers that combined an hour lecture followed by two hours of classroom observation. The lectures focused on the "how to's" of teaching specific topics (for example, God, prayer, the Torah) and on pedagogical skills such as lesson planning, classroom management, and learning centers. The class size varied from 4–15. At the end of the program, a third of the participants usually decided they didn't want to teach and took jobs as teacher aides or office helpers. The others started the following year as assistant teachers.

While this was a compelling model, it was not realistic in our context. In the first place, we did not have the resources to mount a year-long, pre-service training program. Second, the pressure to improve the religious school made it difficult to postpone getting people involved. The 5th and 6th grade parents had already set a precedent by teaching the previous year. Somehow people would have to jump in and learn while doing. The question was how. At first we had no idea how many people would want to become avocational teachers and what kind of commitment they would be willing to make. The process was one of invention and adaptation as we
sought to create an action plan that fit the needs of the school and the realities of people's lives.

**The "start up" phase.** The first six months (January to June, 1992) served as a start-up phase. During this time, we recruited volunteers and solidified their commitment, developed a curriculum framework and selected materials, created organizational structures to manage the project, and finalized a staffing plan for the first year of avocational teaching. This was an important time to build a collective sense of responsibility and to shape norms of participation.

We announced an informational meeting in the congregation's newsletter, and twenty-five people showed up one cold January evening to learn about the project. Some of the parents who were already teaching in the 5/6 grade described their experience. We talked in general terms about the goals of the project, fielded questions as best we could, and distributed a questionnaire asking people to indicate the age level and subjects that interested them. Using that information we organized people into four groups—primary, elementary, *bar/bat mitzvah*, and high school—and held another round of meetings, this time with our outside consultant, Gail Dorph. At these meetings we learned more about people's Jewish backgrounds and interests and talked more concretely about what the religious school should try to accomplish at different age levels. Each group brought new issues to the fore. People at the primary meeting worried about young children coping with too many teachers. People at the elementary meeting were divided about how pluralistic the curriculum should be. Parents of *bar* and *bat mitzvah* students wondered whether they should teach their own children. High school parents wanted serious intellectual content for their kids.

To begin building a commitment to learning as a central part of teaching and to foster a common stance toward Jewish teaching, we organized a day-long workshop in June. The workshop provided an opportunity for the 34 participants to study core Jewish concepts and texts as adults and then consider how these ideas were treated in curricular materials aimed at different age groups. The day was stimulating, even provocative for some, and it reflected some of the qualities that would characterize our ongoing work—a sense of community, serious adult study, laughter, spirituality, and questioning. At the workshop people indicated in writing what kind of time commitment they could make. With this information, the leadership team finalized a staffing plan for the 1992–93 school year.

Most avocational teachers could not teach on Wednesday because of work and family commitments. Nor could they teach Hebrew. So we decided to continue having paid teachers (for example, college students and/or Israelis) teach Hebrew and Judaica on Wednesday afternoons and assign avocational teachers to teach a separate Judaica curriculum on Sunday morning. Because some of the volunteers preferred working with older students, we created a high school program on Sunday evening that was taught completely by avocational teachers.
As the school year approached, we shifted our focus from thinking about how to accommodate the volunteer teachers to thinking about how the students would experience the new program. To clarify expectations for avocational teachers, we developed and distributed a list of responsibilities. By the second year, this list had evolved into an avocational teacher "contract," which we mailed to avocational teachers to sign before the start of the school year. The contract spelled out responsibilities in four areas: (a) responsibilities to the school and educational director (for example, attend teacher orientation, participate in school-wide prayer, and turn in written lesson plans); (b) responsibilities to students (for example, be prepared with an engaging lesson); (c) responsibilities to one's fellow teachers (for example, help each other study materials, and plan, teach, and debrief lessons); and (d) responsibilities to the project (for example, cooperate with documentation activities).

**THE KI "MODEL"**

By the second year, we could talk about a KI approach to avocational teaching that had five key features: (1) reliance on commercial materials as a major source of subject matter and pedagogical knowledge for teachers; (2) grade-level teams as the primary locus for study, preparation, and support; (3) an integrated approach to content and how to teach it; (4) authentic engagement with Jewish texts as a core experience for both teachers and students; and (5) new avocational teachers mentored by more experienced avocational teachers. Some features reflected constraints in the context or goals of the project; others emerged as important enabling conditions.

**Reliance on prepared curricular materials.** The school program was organized into five strands: the Torah (Bible), tefillah (prayer), Hebrew, holidays, and values. Instead of having avocational teachers deal with many different topics, we decided to concentrate on two areas—holidays and the Torah—so that we could coordinate our teacher development efforts and promote deeper learning for both teachers and students. Avocational teachers taught holidays in kindergarten through second grade and the Torah in third through seventh grade. We chose topics for the high school classes based on student and teacher interest and on the availability of good materials. One popular course explored Jewish perspectives on key ethical decisions facing teenagers. Other courses dealt with the Holocaust, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jewish and American Law, and medical ethics.

To support teachers' work with children, we provided them with prepared curricular materials. For example, one of the strongest components of the curriculum was the Torah strand, which begins in the third and fourth grade with a study of Genesis using a special curriculum for children called *Being Torah* (Grishaver & Golub 1985), followed by a study of Exodus in the fifth grade, which uses an instructional guide that is produced by the Melton Research Center (*Zielenziger, Holtz, and Kaunfer, 1984*). Sixth graders learn about the process of Torah commentary using a new curriculum called *Rashi and His World*, which was also developed by the
Melton Center (Ingall, Holtz, and Gaelen, 1992). And seventh graders study the weekly Torah portion with help from a multimedia curriculum, Torah Tunes (Grishaver, 1983). Through this sequence, we hoped students would not only learn what is in the Torah (for example, stories, laws, values, and a Jewish worldview) and consider how it bears on their lives, but also develop a personal connection to the process of Torah study through their own "meaning making" and through the study of commentary.

We viewed curricular materials as an important site for teacher learning (Ball and Cohen, 1997). We counted on teachers learning content and getting some ideas about how to teach that content from studying these materials. Of course, the amount and kind of guidance vary across the different sets of materials. Some teachers' guides contain informative background essays and scripted lessons with typical comments and questions by students. Other materials, written more with students in mind, have less to say to teachers about what and how to teach. Still, we could not have mounted the program without relying on prepared materials to frame goals, sequence content, and provide a substantive framework for teaching and learning.

At the same time, we recognized that ultimately teachers adapt materials to fit their context and create a lived curriculum through their interactions with students. No set of prepared materials can tell teachers how their students will respond, when to move on, whether to pursue a student's question or comment, even if it leads in a totally new direction. The need to combine serious attention to content with serious attention to students' ideas and to hold a lesson plan flexibly in order to exploit teachable moments make teaching a challenging practice. We determined that avocational teachers should not manage these challenges on their own.

**Grade level teams.** Everyone who expressed interest in becoming an avocational teacher worried about how much time it would take. To address this concern, we formed 2–4 person teams at the various grade levels. We tried to put people together with complementary strengths—a person with a penchant for art or drama with a more academic type, someone with more background knowledge and someone with elementary school or middle school teaching experience. Each team was responsible for working out a teaching schedule for the year that provided instructional continuity for students and support for teachers. Different teams took different approaches. In some cases, all team members came to class every Sunday. In other cases, pairs of teachers taught together for several weeks, then one member rotated off and a new member took his or her place.

Several teams met regularly on Sunday morning before or after their hour of teaching to plan or evaluate their lessons; others met during the week. On one team, people faxed their lesson plans to each other early in the week in order to get feedback. Two teams worked together for two years, following their students to the next grade.

The teams became a central locus for joint study, planning, and teaching.
Having co-teachers provided built-in opportunities for problem solving and support. It reduced teacher isolation, a defining characteristic of the culture of teaching in most settings (Lortie, 1975; Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986). Teachers felt more accountable when their practice was open to the scrutiny of others. What began as a strategy to address their initial reluctance to commit to a whole year of teaching became an important structure for promoting teacher learning and developing teaching practice.

Whenever we asked for feedback about the project, people testified to the value of being part of a team. Their comments fit with claims in the educational literature about the benefits of serious, substantive collaboration among teachers (Lieberman and Miller, 1992; Little, 1990; Lord, 1994). "It was wonderful to have colleagues who wanted to talk about my lesson plans," said one avocational teacher. "This year my partner and I taught as a team, and our skills enhanced each other. Planning was good, and working things out gave me a real feeling of teamwork," said a second. "I don't have to wing it because of my co-teachers," reported a third. Even people on one team that did not work so well together realized that they had not formed a support group like the other teams. As one member put it: "We're like a three-legged stool that's missing a leg."

An integrated approach to content and pedagogy. Avocational teachers needed to get inside their content, learn about their students, and find appropriate and engaging ways to teach that content to those students. A conventional approach to teacher learning might have devoted time to the study of content separate from learning how to teach it or worked on general strategies and principles of teaching disconnected from particular content. This is certainly a common practice in pre-service and in-service teacher education.

We adopted a more integrated and contextualized approach, working on content and pedagogy in relation to one another and tying most of the adult learning opportunities to teachers' own work with students. We did this for several reasons. First, putting content and pedagogy together is hard, especially for novices. Second, the urgent need to improve the religious school and the fact that some people had teaching experience worked against the idea of formal study and preparation prior to teaching. Third, we found that avocational teachers were motivated to study content precisely because they had to teach it. They were less interested in general sessions about content or pedagogy and most receptive to assistance in understanding their curriculum and finding effective ways to teach it to their students.

Most of the learning opportunities and resources we provided addressed issues of content and pedagogy at the same time. Our reliance on prepared materials clearly illustrates this approach, for curricular materials put content and pedagogy together for teachers. The way the outside consultant worked with individual teams and the way we structured occasions for adult study, including the use of demonstration lessons, further illustrate this stance.
When the outside consultant visited the project, she spent most of her time meeting with grade-level teams to help them clarify their goals and the concepts they were trying to teach, and figure out how to teach them. When we brought avocational teachers together for adult learning, we studied the same texts they were teaching (for example, Torah texts) and explored topics or concepts directly related to their curriculum (for example, the role of ritual and the nature of religious "truth"). We did not invite experts to give lectures to avocational teachers. Instead, we created opportunities for avocational teachers to study their own subject matter in engaging ways with master teachers or to see master teachers teaching that content to students. Afterwards, we would analyze the teaching and learning that teachers had experienced firsthand or observed and discuss the conceptual and pedagogical issues that came up.

On several of her visits, the outside consultant taught a Torah lesson to all the Torah teachers or to a class of students in the religious school while the teachers observed. These lessons offered object lessons in how to create an encounter with the text that takes students' ideas seriously and encourages their interpretations and commentary. The demonstrations also helped teachers grapple with some of the knotty conceptual issues they would face in teaching the Torah, issues concerning the origins, truth, and authority of the text (Dorph, 1993; Chervin, 1994).

We anticipated that students would have trouble reading the Torah in a non-literal way, that in studying Genesis and Exodus they would undoubtedly ask: "Did this really happen?" "How could this be true?" "Why are we studying this?" Gail Dorph surfaced these issues early on in a lesson for Torah teachers on the opening verses of Exodus, Chapter 3, which record the story of Moses and the burning bush. First, we tried to understand the text ourselves ("What is going on here?" "Did something happen inside or outside Moses?"). Next, we talked about what could be learned from this story. Finally, we discussed how to help students sense the wonder of the "miracle" without getting pulled into a debate about whether it really happened.

This session launched an ongoing conversation about the Torah and Torah teaching and learning. It was the first time most avocational teachers had actually looked at the Torah's version of the story or thought about where they stood on the subject of "miracles." They began to see that in order to teach the Torah in an authentic way, they would have to engage with the text themselves. Written comments by teachers about the lesson provide evidence that they gained both substantive and pedagogical insights from this session.

I really loved the Torah lesson. I learned ways to think about the burning bush episode, the concept of miracle as an experience of wonder. The session clarified a view of teaching the Torah as an encounter with the text.

... I saw a model of teaching. I see how hard this is to do and how challenging it will be.
I really liked working with the text. I learned how to peruse one verse at a time. I will try to incorporate the techniques demonstrated. The experience showed me how to be excited about the text itself not just the story. I need to reread the text. I found a general excitement in approaching the Torah.

It was exciting going through the text and analyzing it and then applying it to teaching. I learned about the burning bush, the names of God, and the dialogue between God and Moses. . . . I got some ways to think about approaching lessons.

I learned that there are places where there are no right answers. . . . I gained new interpretation techniques and a sense of the wonder of it all!

The second year, we invited Dr. Peter Pizele, an expert in teaching the Torah through bibliodrama, to spend a weekend with the congregation as a scholar-in-residence and to work with avocational teachers and their students. On Sunday morning, Dr. Pitzele taught a lesson to third graders on the story of the Tower of Babel while avocational teachers observed. First, he had students build a tower out of cardboard boxes, with and without talking. After eliciting students' ideas about the role of language ("Which way worked better?"), he had them take turns climbing a ladder so that they could look down on the tower. "You're God," he said. "What do you think about this tower that people have built?" "How could you prevent this from happening again?"

Finally, he took out the Torah. "Let's see what the Torah says." After observing the lesson, avocational teachers analyzed how Dr. Pitzele used bibliodrama to help students step into the text and explore its complexities, ambiguities, and silences. Many were inspired to experiment with bibliodrama in their own classes.

**Engagement with authentic Jewish texts.** Avocational teachers were engaged in serious Jewish study, including text study. People reported that they spent 3–4 hours preparing during the weeks when they were teaching, not including the time in school on Sunday morning. Most gratifying was the overwhelming evidence that people really got hooked on Jewish study. Here is a sampling of statements that avocational teachers made at a "taking stock" meeting at the end of the second year, when we asked them what had been most satisfying about their experiences:

- I really enjoy learning myself. Taking time to read the weekly Torah portion has been really terrific.

- Learning about medieval history was so interesting.

- To prepare, I would take time and read the weekly portion. Then I would go back to Plaut (a contemporary commentator) and try to put it together in my own mind.

- My own learning has been the most wonderful part. I try to crystallize from my adult reading what's true for kids.
My own learning and seeing the kids get involved with the material has been very satisfying.

I liked learning the curriculum. I had to read it closely, which is different from just reading it. But I was trying to learn it in a deep way.

Further evidence that the avocational teacher project promoted adult Torah study comes from the fact that five avocational teachers offered to speak about the weekly Torah portion at the congregation's weekly Sabbath service, something they had never done before. Each one acknowledged how the avocational teacher project had been the catalyst for this move. The passages below taken from two of these talks further demonstrate how the project enabled teachers to have their own serious encounters with the Torah as text.

This is the first time since my bar mitzvah that I have had the honor (or more likely the nerve) to stand before a congregation and deliver a d'var Torah. What has generated this courage? What force has overcome all those years of sitting on the sidelines while silently knowing that I would enjoy thinking, studying, and speaking on the weekly portion? ... I would not be standing here had it not been for the avocational teacher program. This program has served to bring out the closet rabbis, those congregants like myself who have had the desire to come closer to Judaism but were unwilling or unable to approach it via the more traditional methods because before you can teach, you have to be interested and motivated to teach yourself.

When my wife began to re-examine her Judaism, I began to re-encounter the Bible. I realized that for my kids, it was just another book on the shelf. If they are to value the Torah, then I must continue an ongoing encounter with it. Teaching helps me do this.... I believe our most important task in the avocational teacher program is to stimulate interaction with the Torah. The process of reading it and thinking about it is essential to Jewish life. I would argue that it is more divine to read and struggle than it is to know.

New teachers mentored by more experienced teachers. A major goal of the project was to create a system that would perpetuate itself when the external funding was over. During the third year of the project, we recruited new volunteers to join existing teams so that they could learn alongside more experienced avocational teachers. This set a precedent for three-person teams at each grade level, one new and two experienced teachers.

Since the funding ended three years ago, we have kept the tradition of avocational teaching going. The first year, we recruited a new avocational teacher for each team. The following year, twelve avocational teachers
volunteered to teach, some new and some veterans. We begin the third year since the end of the grant with nine avocational teachers on the religious school staff and a revitalized high school program in which three of the four offerings are being taught by avocational teachers.

We now have a pool of about eight avocational teachers with 35 years of experience in the religious school. These people know our students and understand particular sets of curricular materials. They have folders of lesson plans to share, and can talk confidently about "what works" with our kids. Understandably, some of these veteran avocational teachers are tired of giving up their Sunday mornings to teach. So we are beginning to consider other ways to utilize the local capacity that we have developed. For instance, instead of serving on a teaching team and mentoring others through co-planning and co-teaching, selected avocational teachers might become consultants to a team of avocational teachers, meeting with them before the start of school to preview the curriculum, observing on a monthly basis to offer feedback and suggestions, and being "on call" to answer questions and help with problem solving. This strategy may offer a more flexible way for experienced avocational teachers to share their knowledge and experience with others.

**ASSESSING AND SUSTAINING THE PROJECT'S IMPACT**

Reflecting on the impact of the project, a member of the original planning group observed: "It seems to be like one of those, not a stone in the pond, but a boulder in the pond. There is a ripple effect that is surprising. It's a big effect. The project seems to have had a big effect." Teachers and students felt this effect. So did the congregation as a whole.

Over the three years, the KI religious school became a more serious place, a place where students and teachers grappled with texts and gained access to some of the "big ideas" that Judaism holds. The presence of ten or more avocational teachers on Sunday morning sent a message to parents and students alike that Jewish education is not just for children. The project brought some new members to the congregation and offered others a way to feel more connected to the community and to Judaism.

Since that time, we have continued to recruit a pool of avocational teachers for the religious school and high school. The bigger challenge is sustaining the broader goals of the project. Reflecting on our experience in light of current thinking about school improvement and teacher learning, we believe that meeting this challenge depends on three related factors: (1) a continuing supply of volunteer teachers; (2) an infrastructure for ongoing teacher development; and, (3) educational leadership that takes teachers and their learning and students and their learning as its central focus, and works to make that learning meaningful.

**Recruitment.** For five years we have had enough volunteer teachers to create 2–3 person teams at most of the grade levels in the religious school.
Equally impressive is the rate of teacher retention. At least a third of these avocational teachers have taught for 35 years. The question is, will this continue? The answer depends in part on our ability to persuade people that teaching in the religious school or the high school is both doable and rewarding.

We are now able to explain what being an avocational teacher at KI entails. We know how much time it takes to plan and teach, what materials are available for use at different grade levels, and why working with teaching partners is important. Drawing on the experience of former avocational teachers, we could develop materials that describe the parameters of the role and testify to the personal satisfaction that studying and teaching provides. We could frame different arguments for different populations (for example, parents with different age children, grandparents, and singles). All this we have learned from our experience. But the success of recruitment ultimately turns on the quality of teachers’ experiences. Avocational teachers who feel supported in learning and teaching generally stay in the classroom for at least two years, and feel responsible for helping to find and/or mentor their replacement.

**Infrastructure for ongoing teacher development.** Teaching worthwhile content in ways that foster active learning is a tall order, especially for people with limited subject matter knowledge and/or conventional views of teaching as telling and learning as listening. To engage in this kind of teaching, teachers need help developing a deeper understanding of their content, creating worthwhile learning activities, planning lessons that stimulate students intellectually, and moving them beyond the acquisition of facts to the making of meaning. To improve as teachers, they need feedback on their teaching and support in working on areas of needed change.

Most inservice or staff development takes the form of one-shot workshops or courses disconnected from teachers' own curriculum or teaching (Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991). Research suggests that teachers are more likely to make improvements in their teaching if they participate in ongoing learning opportunities situated within the realities of their work and practice. The literature on professional development advocates the creation of professional learning communities in which teachers can study subject matter, analyze curricular materials, observe and give feedback on each other's teaching, see models of good practice, and engage in mutual problem solving. These learning opportunities blend support and encouragement with access to new knowledge and ideas (Little, 1993; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1996).

In the KI avocational teacher project, we experimented with different forms of situated learning for teachers and began to create an infrastructure to sustain these opportunities. A teacher orientation before the start of the school year set expectations and contributed to a sense of community. Teams provided ongoing support in planning and teaching. Face-to-face and phone conversations with local and outside consultants helped teachers think about their curriculum and teaching. Stock-taking meetings twice a
year gave teachers a chance to share successes, voice frustrations, and raise questions. An annual in-house retreat with a visiting scholar provided opportunities to grapple with Jewish texts and ideas and experience new forms of teaching and learning. We also sent a handful of promising avocational teachers to summer courses and retreats with the expectation that they would share what they had learned with the rest of us.

As much as possible, we tried to weave these learning opportunities into and around teachers' work. The teacher orientation consisted of a Saturday evening of socializing and study followed by a Sunday morning of logistics and planning. During the school year, teams generally met on Sunday morning before or after their teaching. One team used e-mail to get feedback on lesson plans. Individuals and teams participated in scheduling consultations. Stock-taking meetings occurred right after school on Sunday with lunch provided. Visits by outside experts became special events in the congregation, with open study sessions on Saturday and special sessions for teachers on Sunday. Once a year we canceled school so that teachers could attend a professional development conference for Jewish educators sponsored by the central agency in a nearby community.

Folding teacher development into teachers' ongoing work requires time, imagination, and commitment, especially in the context of part-time schools with part-time and, in our case, volunteer teachers. It also requires a change in the culture of teaching. Many factors work against a systematic and ongoing approach to teacher development. These include the belief that teaching children is really not all that difficult, the elevation of teacher autonomy over collective accountability, and the isolation of teachers in their own classrooms. These pervasive attitudes, norms, and structures perpetuate an individualistic stance toward teaching and make it hard to foster a shared commitment to the ongoing study and improvement of teaching. Creating such a commitment and providing the necessary resources, opportunities, and supports requires a special kind of leadership.

**Leadership.** One of the important lessons that we learned from the avocational teacher project is that a quality school depends on a special kind of on-site leadership—someone who understands, supports, and advocates for ongoing teacher development. Such a person must have a vision of a religious school as a learning community that embraces both teachers and students (and, of course, parents). They must understand issues of teaching and learning, know the school culture, and be able to design, arrange, and lead work with teachers.

Looking back on our original proposal, it is clear that we did not fully appreciate this need. Because we were creating something new, we could not anticipate the kind and amount of guidance and support that avocational teachers would need. Nor did we know ahead of time what forms of teacher learning would work in our setting or what resources it would take. We have come to appreciate that sustaining the broader goals of the avocational teacher project requires leadership in the area of teacher development.
We typically think of the principal as the educational leader, but some principals may not have the time or the training to plan and guide work with teachers. In such cases a master teacher or university teacher educator may fulfill this function. Regardless of who actually designs and leads this work, principals must understand why teachers need opportunities to learn in and around their teaching and advocate for such opportunities (Holtz, Dorph, and Goldring, 1997).

**CONCLUSION**

The Lansing experiment in avocational teaching dramatized the need for an infrastructure to support ongoing teacher learning and for educational leadership to make this happen. It did so precisely because we were working with teachers who had limited subject matter knowledge and/or classroom experience. But these conditions are necessary for teaching and learning to flourish in any school—religious or secular—and they apply to all teachers, paid or volunteer, trained or avocational. The KI avocational teacher project not only launched a new tradition of avocational teaching in our religious school, but it also shaped expectations about the need for serious, ongoing teacher learning of content and pedagogy. Our new challenge and the challenge for all educational institutions is to create structures and mobilize resources to meet those expectations.

**REFERENCES**


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