

Blog Post: Sharon Feiman-Nemser's Impact and Influence

By Susan Kardos
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This guest post is by [Susan Kardos](#), Senior Director of Strategy and Education Planning at The AVI CHAI Foundation and a research associate at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University. She was the Mandel Center's first [post-doctoral fellow](#).

This essay is drawn in part from a summary of the work of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers presented by Susan Moore Johnson and her research team at Harvard in May, and in part from a presentation given during a session called "Teachers as Learners: a Discussion Honoring the Contributions of Sharon Feiman-Nemser to Jewish Education," at the Network for Research in Jewish Education conference in June. The author participated in both.

A little more than fifteen years ago, as a doctoral student at Harvard, I came to know [Sharon Feiman-Nemser](#), first, as a peppering of citations. I got to know her better when I was charged with creating an annotated bibliography of sources related to my interest in new teachers in public schools. It was then I read everything—article after article, chapter after chapter, book after book—and wrote summaries that would become the basis for the literature review in my thesis. Sharon's work about teacher preparation and learning to teach was an early foundational reference for the work of [The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers](#), a Harvard-based research project addressing critical questions about the future of the nation's public school teaching force. Sharon's work featured especially prominently in my contributions to the project, which focused specifically on the kinds of professional cultures new teachers' experience in their schools, especially related to collegial support, mentoring, and induction—all Feiman-Nemser specialties.

At the same time, and a world away from my thesis work, I was pursuing a line of research related to [underground schools in the Warsaw Ghetto](#) during the Holocaust and feeling a stronger and stronger pull toward building a professional home in the world of Jewish education. Imagine my surprise to find that one of my intellectual heroes was not only looking for a post-doctoral research fellow locally, at Brandeis, but was herself crossing the border to make her professional home in the world of Jewish education.

So I took the job, and got to really know Sharon not only as a scholar but also as a graceful and brilliant woman using her passions, skills and talents on behalf of Jewish education and the Jewish people.

Through our daily work at the [Mandel Center](#) and conducting the [Choosing to Teach](#) study—which examined new teachers’ decisions to teach in Jewish, Catholic, and mission-themed charter schools, Sharon taught me important lessons about education research, teaching, learning, and learning to teach.

Luckily, when I left Brandeis to direct the [Jewish day school project](#) at Boston’s [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#), I continued to benefit from Sharon’s wisdom, as she served on a small advisory board that helped guide the project.

And now, we are together again, on opposite sides of email or the phone or google hangouts or a conference table, working to create the [Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education](#) (CASJE), to help our field better connect researchers, practitioners, and funders and to help catalyze and support practice-influenced research and research-influenced practice.

What follows is a brief discussion about teachers as learners which intertwines some of Sharon’s work with some of the work my colleagues and I have done at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers.

In a longitudinal [interview study of 50 new Massachusetts teachers](#), we developed a [way of conceptualizing new teachers’ experiences](#) of the professional culture of their schools, by which we mean the distinct blend of norms, values, and modes of professional practice that new teachers find in their schools. Professional culture can be school-wide or it can exist within sub-units of schools, such as departments, grade levels or clusters. It is the combination of structure and culture that teachers recognize as “the way we do things here.”

We identified 3 types of professional culture. In *veteran-oriented professional culture* there are separate camps of novices and veterans. They may be friendly to each other, but the professional culture is determined by the majority veteran staff. New teachers operate at the margins of the professional culture, which values independence above all. There is no ongoing professional exchange between novices and veterans, and novices do not benefit from the knowledge and wisdom of their experienced colleagues. While this typology was developed for schools in the public sector, schools with this kind of professional culture can certainly be found within the Jewish day school sector.

In *novice-oriented professional culture* the professional culture is determined by the majority novice faculty. In the public sector you would most likely find this professional culture in charter or reconstituted public schools. In the Jewish day school sector you might find this in new, small schools; educator-initiated schools; or niche schools. These schools are like “start-ups.” They are characterized by youth, idealism, and frenzy. While they are quite different from veteran-oriented professional cultures, the results for novices are the same: they do not benefit from the knowledge and wisdom of experienced colleagues.

The third (and preferred) type is the *integrated professional culture*, which has 3 main facets: (1) teacher interaction—ongoing exchange between experienced and novice teachers, (2) novice status—attention to the particular needs and talents of new teachers, and (3) collective responsibility—a shared sense of responsibility for the school and all the students.

This study gave us a useful typology, which I suspect will hold up as a useful framework for understanding new teachers' experiences in Jewish day schools, but it needs to be tested. We had rich data about formal support structures like new teacher mentoring, teachers meetings, common planning time, and classroom observations. And we had data that suggested the regardless of what formal structures for support new teachers had, those formal structures mattered little to new teachers, unless they were embedded in integrated professional cultures.

So we followed up with a random sample survey study of 486 new teachers in 4 states. [In that study we found](#) that, overall, there is not ongoing interaction between veterans and novices; new teachers are not granted a kind of novice status that recognizes their needs and their value; and they are not part of a cohesive school culture where there is shared responsibility for all students and the school. [In addition, we found](#), on average, the extent to which new teachers experience the professional culture of their school as an integrated professional culture is positively related to the job satisfaction.

Integrated professional cultures are good for new teachers and are associated with job satisfaction. Job satisfaction contributes to teacher retention, which is good for schools because (a) turnover is expensive, and (b) teachers continue to improve as they gain experience year over year, which is good for students. Among the important elements that promote integrated professional culture, I highlight three, which Sharon has always gotten right—both in her scholarly work *and* in practice. The first is deliberately [educative mentoring](#) that extends well beyond a simple 1:1 pairing and is seriously focused on learning to teach. The second is comprehensive [school-based induction](#) that includes veterans, novices, and school leaders. The third is principal and teacher leadership that cultivate strong [learning communities for teachers](#).

What might all this mean for Jewish education policy and research? I think it mostly means moving beyond a piecemeal approach in both. First, we have to think about how to fund programs that develop both the individual *and* the organization. In the Jewish school sector, we have to expect to have to do it school by school or in small batches. Sharon has always had the wisdom to create interventions that develop the individual and the organization. Her [school-based induction program](#) is a great example of this. The [DeLeT](#) program also has this feature. Unfortunately, very few funders are willing to invest in the high costs, complexity, and long time-lines of school improvement. But truthfully, I can't ultimately see any other way to get the schools we want and our children and the Jewish people deserve.

Second, we need to try to integrate the work that Jewish education researchers do with the families of questions that need answers at the school site. We need to find ways to help funders use those findings to make decisions about what to fund, and we need to help school leaders make decisions about what school level policies to implement and how. This is a hard and complex endeavor. How lucky we are that CASJE is one of the efforts toward which Sharon is devoting her creativity, wisdom, and passion.