Blog Post: Understanding the Day School Student: What do THEY Think about Torah?

By Jon Levisohn
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Should we focus our efforts to improve the field of Jewish education on teaching, or on learning?

From its founding in 2002, the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis has focused on teaching-and-learning. The hyphens in the phrase signal that we (and the field of teaching-and-learning in general) think about the two terms in relationship to each other. We have always cared about both. At the same time, most of our research over the past decade has looked more closely at the teaching end of the teaching-and-learning spectrum.

More recently, we have become increasingly aware that the field of Jewish education needs to be paying more attention to learners and learning, to hard questions about our desired outcomes and how we might assess those outcomes, and especially, to understanding learners’ experiences. In response to this need new Mandel Center projects now being developed and launched will focus less on the former term and more on the latter. Indeed, we have already begun to do so—and the new name of this blog, “Learning about Learning,” is one way of signaling that shift.

How delightful, therefore, to discover that others are thinking in similar ways. In the following guest post, originally published by the Jim Joseph Foundation, Stanford doctoral student Ziva Reimer Hassenfeld articulates why she believes that field of the teaching and learning of classical Jewish texts needs to adopt precisely the shift that I describe above, and how she intends to make that happen in her own work.

By Ziva Reimer Hassenfeld

Much of the literature on teaching and learning classical Jewish texts adopts a prescriptive stance. Scholars argue about which Jewish texts should be taught, how teachers could teach those texts, and how students should be learning those texts (Kanerek 2009; Spitzer, 2013; Steinberg, 2013; Tanchel 2013). Apparently, feeling as if the justification for teaching classical Jewish texts is not self-evident, unlike the justification for teaching math or literacy, the field has placed a great emphasis on exploring the question of whether we should teach classical Jewish texts at all (Bekerman, 2001; Dashefsky & Lebson, 2002; Holtz, 2005; Bekerman & Rosenfeld 2011).

The prescriptive emphasis in the literature may result from particular challenges faced by Jewish education. First, without any standardized curriculum or centralized bureaucracy, it is
hard to determine what teachers are teaching. Second, because there are so many different statements of goals for Jewish education – as many statements as there are views on the meaning and purpose of Judaism- it is difficult to articulate a standard against which the quantity and quality of student learning can be evaluated. Finally, unlike math and literacy, which seem obviously relevant to students’ everyday life, classical Jewish texts are less obviously relevant to students’ everyday life. Therefore Jewish educators feel a need to justify its inclusion in the curriculum.

But this emphasis on prescriptions has left many basic questions of Jewish education unanswered. Other than a handful of studies, we don’t know what teachers are teaching, even across a single grade level, or what students are learning. Perhaps, more importantly, we don’t know how students are learning, how they see themselves in relation to the text, what strategies they use to make meaning out of the text, and what goals they assign to the study of the text. All prescriptive conversations about the teaching and learning of classical Jewish text implicitly ignore that there are real students in the classroom.

In order to offer more informed answers about what Jewish education should be, we need to first understand what students’ experiences are with Jewish education. My doctoral work will explore the actual experiences of students as they study classical Jewish texts. Of the various genres of classical Jewish texts taught in Jewish schools, I will be focusing on the Hebrew Bible. My research seeks to answer the question: how do students see themselves as readers of Biblical texts? How do they see the task of reading Biblical texts?

I believe that understanding the students’ experience will be invaluable to improving and envisioning the future of Jewish day school education.

Stanford is the ideal home for my research pursuits. The methodological rigor with which we are trained, taking almost a dozen method courses with top researchers in the field, allows me to design my research project with precision and intentionality. Every choice I am making, from the wording of an interview question to the triangulation of data collection is rooted in scholarship. Moreover, the training I receive through my work on my research team provides the opportunity to practice the skills I need and reflect with my advisor and fellow doctoral students on the nature of empirical research.

The Jewish Studies faculty at Stanford has also welcomed me with open arms. By morning I delve deep into the world of empirical research at the School of Education; by afternoon I study my favorite classic Jewish texts with leading experts in the field. My own sense of purpose and belonging in the world of Jewish Education is deeply nurtured by the Jewish Studies component of this program.

Finally, the Palo Alto Jewish community has been an incredible personal and professional resource. This community has enabled me to connect with a variety of Jewish educators in the Bay Area community and with the local Jewish day schools, both as an educator and a researcher. I was so graciously surprised by the vitality of the Jewish community here on the West Coast.

My goal is that my work can contribute to a larger conversation in Jewish education about the student. As we earnestly strive for the betterment of Jewish education, it will be imperative to turn our ears to those actually in the classrooms. My hope is that my research will serve as both a methodological model and an important contribution to empirical data on the students and their experiences with classical Jewish texts.
Ziva Reimer Hassenfeld is a doctoral student at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education in the Jewish Studies and Education concentration. She is also a Wexner Graduate Fellow and Davidson Scholar. Her passion is the teaching and learning of Hebrew Bible at all levels.