

Blog Post: Studies IN Jewish Education

By Sharon Feiman-Nemser
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People often ask me how the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education got its name and what the name stands for. In answering this question, I focus on two elements in our name — the noun “studies” and the preposition “in.”

I chose the phrase “*studies* in Jewish education” rather than “research in Jewish education” because I wanted to signal a broader set of scholarly activities than the word “research” typically suggests. We usually think of research as the province of academics with doctorates in some area of specialization. In the field of education, however, practitioner research has gained new standing because of its potential to narrow the gap between theory and practice and contribute valuable “insider” perspectives on teaching and learning. Practitioner research presumes that some of the knowledge we need to improve education includes practitioners’ ways of knowing. So, in addition to supporting conceptual and empirical inquiries by educational researchers and Jewish studies scholars interested in Jewish education, the Mandel Center is a home for studies of practice by teacher-researchers.

For example, a project called “Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy” recruited talented teachers of Tanakh and rabbinic literature from diverse settings and supported them in studying a question or challenge in their teaching. A collection of these studies of practice will soon be published by Academic Studies Press. To take another example, each year DeLeT students who are preparing to become teachers in Jewish day schools in one track of the Master of Arts in Teaching program at Brandeis, carry out a piece of classroom research focused on a question or problem that has arisen during their internship. They formulate a research question, collect and analyze data, develop their findings, and present their studies in an annual conference at the end of the program. In these ways the Mandel Center is promoting a serious tradition of practitioner research in Jewish education.

This brings me to the “in” in our name. There are many legitimate and valuable approaches to adopt in pursuing educational research. Because the Center is dedicated to improving and transforming Jewish education, we focus our research on the core practices of teaching and learning – the dynamic transaction of teachers, learners and content in context – that lie at the heart of the educational process. The preposition “in” is intended to signal this focus. This differs from research *on* education which uses tools from other fields such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy and psychology to illuminate educational questions and problems. In subsequent blog posts I’ll describe how this orientation to education research shapes the Center’s research agenda and how this kind of scholarship can enlarge our understanding and transform the practice of Jewish education.