

Parents as religious school teachers: A survey of participants in the avocational teacher project at congregation Kehillat Israel

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a survey given to avocational teachers at Congregation Kehillat Israel in Lansing, Michigan at the beginning and end of a three-year project designed to recruit and prepare volunteer teachers for the religious school. The survey sought to learn about participants' Jewish educational background, their motivation for joining the project, their experiences as avocational teachers, and the impact of the project on them and on the religious school. Findings reveal that participants joined the program to improve the education of their children and to enhance their own Jewish learning. They valued the opportunity to work with co-teachers but found teaching more challenging than expected. Overall the project improved the quality of the religious school and enriched the lives of the avocational teachers.

Introduction

By the late 1980s, a small group of parents at Congregation Kehillat Israel (KI) in Lansing, Michigan, realized that we shared a feeling of frustration with the education that our children were receiving in the synagogue's religious school.  Most of the teachers in the school were college undergraduates with limited knowledge of the curriculum and how to teach it and with little time and interest in developing their teaching skills. As they moved from the early to the middle grades, our children increasingly found religious school to be a meaningless and unpleasant experience. Worse yet, the experience seemed to be generating negative feelings toward Judaism.

Through informal conversations, we discovered that we had an important resource to address the problem—our own skills and commitment. We realized that KI parents were capable of studying curricular materials and learning new content, had experience as teachers, and cared enough about

the education of our children to commit the time necessary to do a good job. Thus, in the Fall of 1991, a small group of parents decided to try teaching in the fifth and sixth grades of the religious school.

Around the same time, the group wrote a proposal to the Covenant Foundation of New York seeking funds to establish a parent-based teaching program. We received a three-year grant, which enabled us to hire a highly trained and talented Jewish educator to serve as the school principal and to create the Avocational Teacher Program (ATP). During the ensuing years, teams of "avocational" (volunteer) teachers taught in kindergarten through seventh grade and in a newly created high school program. 🗨️

As part of a larger effort to document the project, we surveyed participants at the beginning and end of the three year funding period. The survey sought answers to the following questions:

1. What Jewish background and teaching experience did avocational teachers bring to the project?
2. What motivated people to join the project?
3. What was the experience of classroom teaching like? How did the reality match peoples' expectations?
4. How helpful were the different forms of support that the project provided?
5. According to participants, how did the project affect the quality of the religious school?
6. What impact did the project have on the teachers themselves?

We first surveyed participants in June, 1992, when the project was in its pilot stage and the congregation had just received the Covenant grant. At this point relatively few people had actually taught in the religious school. We received responses from 36 of 38 volunteers.

The second survey was completed in May, 1996. We received responses from 31 of the 35 people who had taught at some time during the previous four years. Of those who filled out the survey in 1996, 12 had done so in 1992 and 16 had not, having joined after the first year. There were missing data for another 5 cases. Thus taking both years, we had somewhere between 53 and 58 distinct respondents. To assure respondents of anonymity, we did not ask for names or any other information that would enable us to pair the responses of those who filled out the survey in both years.

Demographic Background of Teachers

The avocational teachers who volunteered to be part of the Lansing, Michigan project can be described in various ways. Two thirds were women, the rest were men. In the first year of the project, three high school students, all girls, signed up to co-teach with their mothers. After that, all participants were adults. Three of the teachers were non-Jewish. All participants were members of the congregation.

Many of the avocational teachers were born in large Jewish communities and had moved to the Lansing area to work at the university or in the state government. In terms of their occupations, participants included doctors, lawyers, nurses, social workers, an accountant, teachers, an architect, various professors, a nutritionist, psychologists, an economist, and state government officials. Some of the teachers were women with small children who worked in the home.

To estimate the Jewish educational background of our teachers, we combined the data from both surveys.  As Table 1 reveals, a small number of participants (6%) had attended day school, while slightly more than half (58%) had attended supplementary schools once or twice a week. Those who had received no formal Jewish education (36%) outnumbered those who had attended day school (6%).

In 1992, we asked participants about their prior experience as Jewish educators. We found that 50% of the sample had worked as Jewish educators, some at Kehillat Israel (for example, during the pilot year), others outside KI.

We also assessed participants' prior teaching experience, again combining responses from the two years and eliminating duplication. Of the forty-nine respondents who provided information, 30 (61.2%) had some teaching experience. In fact, 70% of those thirty people had taught at the university level, which was not surprising for a congregation located in a university town.

What Motivated the Avocational Teachers?

Desire to improve the Jewish education of our own children motivated those of us who conceived of the avocational teacher project. Thus, it is no surprise that a clear majority of teachers were parents of religious school students. In 1992, 61.1% of those who completed the survey had at least one child currently enrolled in the school. In 1996, the corresponding figure was 66.7%. Most of the remaining participants were parents of children who had already graduated.

There were other motivations as well—serving the community, feeling connected to the congregation, and learning as one taught. In both 1992 and 1996, we asked people to rate various reasons for their participation in the program on a scale of (0) not important; (1) somewhat important; (2) important; and (3) very important. The list of questions and data for each year are presented in Table 2.  In addition, answers to open-ended questions tell us about participants' reasons for joining the project.

Looking at the 1992 closed-ended responses, we see two dominant themes. Participants wanted to help their own children, but also enjoyed learning themselves. In particular, they wanted to learn about Judaism so that they could feel connected to their heritage. Further information about why people volunteered to teach in the program comes from examining the

open-ended comments. Of the twenty-eight people who answered this question in 1992, 21.4% mentioned doing it to help the larger community. The same percentage said they were doing it to help their own family. By contrast, 71.4% said they got involved in order to learn more themselves.

By 1996, it was even clearer that being an avocational teacher served multiple functions. Open-ended responses showed that the three reasons most often listed as important were (1) learning more about Judaism; (2) contributing to the synagogue; and (3) improving their children's Jewish education.

In-depth interviews with a sample of participants enabled us to explore these reasons further and probe their meaning (Wohl, this issue). The interviews reveal a shift in people's motivation from more external concerns about children and the school to more internal reasons related to their own religious development and learning. Perhaps we do not see such dramatic changes from 1992 to 1996 in the survey data because some of the questions were not asked in both years.

The ATP Experience: Expectation and Reality

Time commitment. In 1992, before they began teaching, respondents were asked how many hours they expected to spend each week preparing for teaching. In 1996, those who had taught were asked how much time they had actually spent. The comparison can be found in Table 3. The distributions are not drastically different. For both years, the median and mean are very close to 3-5 hours per week.

Problem: worries and reality. In 1992, respondents were asked about possible worries. In 1996, these veterans of the classroom were asked which of the possible worries had turned out to be problems. Table 4 below shows the proportion who expected a problem in 1992 and the proportion who in 1996 reported that they had experienced the problem as teachers.

Before teaching, people most worried about "Finding enough time" and "Not knowing enough." After serving as avocational teachers, "Finding enough time" had moved to second place and "Maintaining classroom discipline" became the most common problem. Put another way, people anticipated that "Not knowing enough," "Finding enough time," and "Not finding adequate resources" would be more of a problem than they turned out to be. By contrast, "Maintaining classroom discipline" and "Not experiencing success as teachers" were more often problems than people had expected.

These findings provide an interesting window onto the experience of being an avocational teacher. It is understandable that people with full-time jobs and limited Judaica background might worry about how much time the project would take and whether they would know enough to teach. Perhaps the provision of curricular materials and other resources along with access to advice on content and pedagogy may have reduced concerns about having adequate knowledge. In terms of time commitment, people ended

up spending about as much time as they had expected. The satisfaction people experienced studying the materials and planning with their teaching partners may have ameliorated their concerns about the amount of time they were spending. Also, people worked in grade level teams, so they could usually get someone to cover for them if they needed to miss a class.

Most intriguing is the unanticipated concerns some people had about their success in the classroom. Clearly some participants found teaching young children to be more challenging than anticipated. Sometimes discipline was a problem. Sometimes teachers had to resist the impulse to lecture in favor of leading discussions and drawing out students' ideas. In the upper grades especially, avocational teachers still had to combat students' ambivalence about attending religious school in the first place. Overall, people worked hard to design lessons that would engage students and make the content meaningful, but apparently they found that teaching well is not easy.

Support. To help avocational teachers with their teaching, the project provided access to various forms of support and expertise. Everyone worked on a team, so no one had to plan and teach alone. Everyone had access to curricular materials and other resources, including a teachers' guide. The project sponsored several workshops with outside experts, and all teams had periodic consultations with outside and local experts. Once or twice a year avocational teachers met as a group to share experiences and discuss common concerns. One team had regular coaching and classroom observation over the three years by a teacher educator who was a member of the team.

In 1996, we asked teachers to rate the importance of each of these forms of support for their teaching. The same scale-"Not important" 0 to "Very important" 3-was used. The results in Table 5 are very clear. Avocational teachers found the opportunity to talk with their co-teachers most valuable. Studying curricular materials was a close second, and participating in workshops with outside experts came in third. While these findings indicate what was most valuable to the teachers, we should not conclude that other activities were perceived as useless. Most forms of support received mean ratings above 1, the rating for "Somewhat important."

The findings about valued resources and supports echo themes in the literature on in-service education and teacher development ([Lieberman and Miller, 1979](#); [Little, 1987](#)). In general, teachers favor learning opportunities that relate directly to their ongoing work with students. They consistently value time to talk with colleagues, and they appreciate access to ideas and materials that they can use in their classroom. One of the reasons we created teams of teachers at each grade level was to provide opportunities for collaboration, mutual support, and joint problem solving. It also makes sense that avocational teachers valued talking with teammates over large group discussions where the chance to deal with their particular concerns might be limited.

Another defining feature of the project was reliance on good curricular materials as an important source of subject matter knowledge and

pedagogical guidance. The finding that teachers valued the chance to study curricular materials and other resources confirms our expectation that teachers without much background knowledge and/or teaching experience would rely heavily on this source of knowledge and support.

Although workshops were few in number, they were planned in response to teachers' interests (for example, an art workshop for teachers in lower grades) or because they related directly to the curriculum (for example, a workshop in teaching Bible through psychodrama). The quality of the presenters and the relevance of the topics probably account for their relatively high rating.

Effects of the Avocational Teacher Program on the Religious School

As indicated above, the desire to improve the religious school motivated people to join the avocational teacher project. In fact, the 1992 survey results show that of the 25 respondents answering this question, 64% were motivated to a great extent by their concerns for the teaching program and another 28% were somewhat motivated by this concern. Only 8% reported being minimally concerned about this issue.

What then was the actual effect of the program on the quality of the school? While we have no objective impact data, we did ask avocational teachers with children in the school how satisfied they were with the school program. The degree of satisfaction was measured on a three point scale where "not satisfied" was scored "zero," "somewhat satisfied" was scored "one," and "satisfied" was scored "two." We see from Tables 6a to 6c that satisfaction increased by about .8 units on a scale whose values range from zero to 2. This is a large increase. In 1992, a response of "satisfied" was rare. In 1996, a response of "not satisfied" was rare. Not only were these differences between 1992 and 1996 substantial, they were also highly significant despite the small samples.

Clearly the Avocational Teacher Program succeeded dramatically in improving satisfaction with the school, at least among those in the program. Still, we must ask how much this reflects actual improvements in teaching? It may reflect positive attitudes born from feeling some control over the school and from the fact that, in rating the school, one is partly rating oneself. We could give a more definitive answer to this question if we also had data at the same two points in time about the attitudes of parents who were not part of the program. Unfortunately, we do not.

Nevertheless, we have reasons to believe that there were qualitative changes in the experiences of children in the school. First, from informal discussions with parents not involved in the program, we have a clear impression that they perceived a substantial improvement in the school. Second, most respondents had their own children in the school, and these children would, we suspect, be quite willing to correct any illusory perceptions of improvement on their parents' part! It is also interesting to

note that evaluations of the Hebrew curriculum, which was not taught by avocational teachers, improved just as much as evaluations of the Judaica curriculum, which was taught by avocational teachers. The improved rating of the Hebrew curriculum further suggests that avocational teachers were not simply patting themselves and their friends on the back.

If avocational teachers were not teaching Hebrew, why did the ratings of the Hebrew curriculum also improve? Two explanations seem most likely. One is that the school director, hired partly with the grant, was able to improve the overall quality of teaching. Another complementary explanation is that the avocational teachers modeled competent teaching and set a tone of seriousness that carried over into other teachers' classrooms.

Effects of the Avocational Teacher Program on the Teachers

As indicated above, most avocational teachers had little formal Jewish education. How did teaching Jewish texts and content affect their interest in various forms of Jewish learning and practice? In both 1992 and 1996, respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of 16 different Jewish activities on a scale of (0) Not important; (1) Somewhat important; (2) Important; and (3) Very important, of adult participation in formal and informal Jewish learning opportunities.  The list of activities, which were based on items from a survey and date for each year, are presented in Table 7.

As we can see, the mean importance increased by .20 or more on eight of the sixteen Jewish activities. By contrast, the mean importance decreased by that amount on only two activities. The areas showing the greatest mean increase were, in order: (j) Purposefully studying Jewish texts; (m) Taking responsibility for a synagogue project; (n) Participating in Jewish customs in everyday life; (i) Attending high holiday services; and (b) Reading the Bible and other religious texts. These results strongly suggest certain positive effects of the avocational teaching experience. Still, two alternative explanations merit consideration. First, these results may reflect increased integration into the KI community that comes from being a member for a longer period of time. Second, improvements effected by the new school principal (and perhaps the project as well) caused these changes. While the second alternative suggests that the avocational teacher project affected the congregation, it does not assume that being a teacher had any additional effect on one's attitudes.

We can test these alternatives through multiple regressions by using each of the "importance" measures as a dependent variable with the following three independent variables: 1) Year (1992 vs. 1996); 2) # of Years as a KI member; and 3) # Years as an avocational teacher.  By doing so, we learn the effect of each independent variable, while statistically controlling for the other independent variables (in other words, holding the others constant).

The multiple regressions used the five "importance" variables, which showed the greatest positive change between 1992 and 1996 as our dependent variables. The results, shown in Table 8, are quite dramatic. For four of the five dependent variables, the standardized regression coefficient for # Years as an avocational teacher was substantially larger than the coefficient for either of the other two predictors. For one dependent variable-"Participating in Jewish customs related to daily living"- "# Years as a Member" has a coefficient approximately equal to "# Years as an Avocational Teacher." Thus it seems clear that, overall, the avocational teacher project had the greatest causal effect on participants' interest in Jewish learning opportunities.

Why might this be the case? Two of the five items where the most change occurred ("Studying Jewish texts" and "Reading the Bible") were very closely related to teaching activities in grades 3-7. Over half the avocational teachers taught Torah (Bible) in these grades and worked with the outside consultant on text teaching/ learning. 🗨️ So the increase in those areas seems to be a direct result of teaching. "Participating in Jewish customs in daily life" was more relevant to the curriculum in the lower grades. 🗨️ On the other hand, increased interest in "Taking responsibility for a synagogue project" may be an indirect result of participating in a project that generated more positive attitudes towards religious activity overall and a greater sense of integration into the synagogue community.

Summary

Most participants in our project were women. Most did not have extensive Jewish education or prior experience as Jewish educators, and most were parents of one or more children in the religious school. Participants joined the program to improve the education of their children and to enhance their own Jewish learning. They found that studying curricular materials and working with co-teachers were most helpful in developing their teaching. Lack of knowledge and the time commitment were less of a problem than they feared, but discipline and uncertain success in the classroom emerged as unexpected problems.

After the program had been operating for four years, avocational teachers rated the school substantially better than they had at the beginning of the program. Moreover, the experience of teaching caused teachers themselves to change. They became substantially more interested in studying the Bible and other Jewish texts, more interested in attending High Holiday Services, and more interested in observing Jewish customs in their daily lives. By statistically controlling for other variables, we can conclude that the more years one spent as an avocational teacher, the more one experienced these effects. Desire to improve the education of one's children served as one important motivation; however, from the start many people volunteered to teach in the religious school because of what they could learn themselves. In short, the avocational teacher project at Congregation Kehillat Israel in Lansing, Michigan not only improved the Jewish education of our children, it also enriched the lives of those who have taught in the program.

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