

## Blog Post: NRJE and CASJE: Laying the Foundation for Successful Jewish Education Research

By Renee Rubin Ross  
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*Today's guest post is by Renee Rubin Ross, a program officer at the Jim Joseph Foundation and a former post-doctoral fellow at the Mandel Center. This piece originally appeared on the foundation's blog.*

In early June, I attended the Network for Research in Jewish Education (NRJE) conference, held at The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. It was a great opportunity to hear about different research projects and catch up with colleagues. In the early morning hours before the meetings started, I even had the chance to go running in Central Park, very sentimental for me since I used to run in Central Park frequently when we lived in Manhattan a few years ago.

My primary purpose for attending the conference was to participate in discussions about the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE), an effort to bring together funders, researchers, and practitioners for the purpose of improving Jewish education. These individuals work collaboratively to address CASJE's three primary areas of focus (termed "panels"): Israel Education, chaired by Mitch Malkus and Alex Pomson; Jewish Educational Leadership, chaired by Ellen Goldring, Joe Reimer and Lee Shulman; and Educational Sustainability, chaired by Ari Kelman and Rachel Friedberg. At the conference, I saw several indicators that portend well for CASJE going forward.

First, CASJE's work is generating significant interest. The CASJE panel chairs hosted a breakfast to share their work in the three respective areas. About 40 attendees sat at one of three CASJE panel tables, learned about the efforts thus far to address that specific area, and offered feedback. At the Jewish Educational Leadership table, which I joined, there was a thoughtful conversation about what we know about effective Jewish educational leadership, how we might learn more, and an excitement about research teams that could potentially work to describe and analyze Jewish educational leadership together.

Second, while the NRJE has been a supportive network of colleagues, I saw unprecedented activity around thinking together to build capacity in the doctoral training of researchers. At a meeting on "Advancing Doctoral Training in Jewish Education: A Group Inquiry," participants took a "guided tour" of posters that described the requirements, dissertation topics and graduate job placements for the Ph.D. or Ed.D. programs in Jewish Education at Stanford University, New York University, Brandeis University, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, The Jewish Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University, and Hebrew College. Representatives from each of these programs participated in the conversation, including conveners Bethamie Horowitz and Sharon Feiman-Nemser, as well as Ben Jacobs, Ari Kelman, Rona Novick, Michael Shire, Joe Reimer, Michael Zeldin, and others.

One idea that emerged in this conversation was an interest in greater collaboration among graduate students and faculty across these institutions. For example, Jewish education researchers could come together for a one or two week “research camp,” a type of retreat that occurs in other fields and is successful. However, moving forward on this and similar ideas is challenging given the teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities of the faculty of these programs. Possibly, CASJE could provide the funding and organizational structure to build research capacity and improve the “structures” for young researchers. Currently, young researchers often do not have enough access to the resources or mentors they need to reach their full potential as innovative and effective researchers in the field. But, in this vision, CASJE would organize teams of researchers to collaborate on large projects that could also serve as labs for graduate student researchers. Perhaps CASJE might also organize opportunities such as the research camp so that graduate students have the opportunity to learn alongside veteran researchers.

Lastly, at the conference I saw exciting examples of applied research, in which researchers work with practitioners to collect data about practice while simultaneously guiding improvement. Both researchers and practitioners gain from this dynamic. Senior Research Associate Orit Kent from the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, for example, described how her work with teachers on *hevruta* learning encourages them to pay closer attention to how learning is structured in their classrooms. Subsequently, Kent is able to better understand the teachers’ process of teaching Jewish texts, including (but not limited to) their teaching of *hevruta*, while the teachers themselves improve their teaching. Former Mandel Center Senior Research Associate Sarah Birkeland described her work with teacher induction in Jewish day schools in similar terms: new teachers and teacher coaches took reflective notes on their experience and learning, and these notes and other artifacts were used to improve their work and as data for her own research project.

Most graduates of doctoral programs in Jewish education have been Jewish education practitioners. These graduates have worked in congregations, camps, day schools, Hillels or other settings and are looking to use their research training to create new knowledge and improve the field of Jewish education. There is no question that these doctoral programs enable individuals to use their understanding of research in Jewish education to expand the impact of their own work. The next challenge for the field is putting structures in place to broaden and multiply that impact. NRJE helps to do this and CASJE – having come at a moment of openness and readiness – has the potential to do even more.

*Note: To be clear, it is anticipated that CASJE will have funding for research projects, whereas the NRJE is a network of researchers who share ideas and get feedback, but the Network itself has no funding for research.*