Making the Best of the Worst of Times
Thinking of Schools as Vehicles of Meaning for Teachers
by Alex Pomson

Neither the recruitment nor the retention of teachers is a special Jewish problem. In recent years, school boards in most parts of the English-speaking world have faced a steep decline in the numbers of qualified teachers prepared to work in the classroom. It is estimated, for example, that in the United States, 20% of teachers leave the profession each year[1] and that in the United Kingdom, one half of all teachers abandon teaching within five years of starting their careers.[2]

Governments and school boards are resorting to bold and sometimes-desperate strategies to solve this deepening problem. In the United States, "golden hellos," "welcome back," and "upheaval" packages have become commonplace as boards and states try to lure recruits. In the UK, university graduates have been allowed to acquire teacher certification while they work full-time in schools, making pre-service teacher education irrelevant. In the province of Ontario, the shortage is so acute that non-qualified "emergency" personnel are allowed to supervise classes. In some well-publicized cases, children have been sent home from school for the day because nobody could be found to teach them.

Against a backdrop as bleak as this, the difficulties faced by Jewish schools seem little worse than a chronic form of a general malady. At the best of times, Jewish schools face special recruitment challenges. For deep-seated socio-economic reasons, the Jewish community draws on a relatively small pool of qualified teachers. Because of their relatively small size, boards of Jewish education cannot compete with the financial incentives offered by public jurisdictions. And, because of the special content of Judaic and Hebrew curricula, schools must look for personnel with specialized skills and knowledge. At a time when these relative disadvantages have been exacerbated by the rampant expansion of day schools, it is easy to despair of the community solving its particular problems.

The Advantage of Jewish Schools

Foolhardy as it may appear, I want to argue here for a different and less pessimistic conclusion. I want to make the case over the next few pages that in certain important ways Jewish schools might be advantaged over public schools in their search to recruit and retain teachers. Indeed, if recruitment strategies play to these special strengths, the community may be able to deploy some promising-looking strategies.

My argument is moved by what I have learned over the last three years working on two university-based projects: A research program exploring the lives and work of Jewish teachers and a teacher preparation initiative for Jewish communities in western Canada. More fundamentally, this argument is also grounded in a view of teaching that has been forcefully recovered in the recent past by scholars such as Robert Bullough Jr., David Hansen and Don Hamachek[3].

Briefly stated, this approach stems from a notion that while there are formal ways in which teaching is similar to other professions, it differs from them in the exceptional fashion in which it involves the practitioner as a person. As Geert Keltchermans succinctly puts it, in teaching, personal self and professional self powerfully overlap.[4] Although a teacher's work occurs in a social space, teaching calls for an investment of the

individual's identity that is unusually intense, making it sometimes a brutal experience. The teacher's personal self is forged in a reality created in large part by students. Choosing to be a teacher is not a matter of selecting one brand of employment over another; it is, rather, a choice of personhood.

Over the last three years, this view of teaching has provided the conceptual framework for a research program at York University examining the evolving professional selves of Jewish teachers. One project, completed in 1999, employed reflective journals and periodic interviews to explore the life and work of Judaic and general studies day school teachers over the course of a year. A second and ongoing project has used intensive semi-structured interviews in order to explore the career stories of some twenty graduates of the Jewish Teacher Education Program at York.

Pragmatism and Principle

Aspects of these studies have been reported in other places. Here, I want to focus on what they reveal about teacher recruitment and retention.[5] In telling their career stories, research participants articulate if and how they initially came to see themselves as teachers. In reflecting on the content of their professional lives, they shed light on what shaped their decisions to remain teachers.

First and foremost, these studies make plain the mix of pragmatism and principle that informs a decision to teach. On one level, research participants speak of the ways in which day school positions have enabled them to find some balance between work and parenting roles – coordinating car-pool, taking the same vacations as their children, or carving out satisfactory maternity leaves. On another, more profound level, they suggest that teaching has been compatible with their evolving sense of self and with their changing identities as mothers and workers. It has enabled them to integrate different parts of their lives, working in places that feel like home, where they can share a love of learning with children, and help others lead less bifurcated Jewish lives.

One research participant put it in these terms:

> "I was offered a position in the public (school) board at the same time that I was offered (a day school general studies position)… I took this. I felt comfortable. It was home and it was my lifestyle. My children were being raised and going through a day school system and I felt that this is where I wanted to be."

Sentiments such as these are significant. While we may be accustomed to hearing teachers talk about the rewards involved in working with children or making a positive difference in people's lives, we have tended to overlook the ways in which work in a school can provide other kinds of satisfaction. Teaching, it seems, offers teachers, no less than students, an opportunity to belong. Schools are places where, as adults, they can find meaning in their lives.

A Search for Personal Meaning

While our research shows that there are teachers who do not see teaching as anything other than a convenient form of employment, many with whom we talked indicated that some of the deepest satisfactions in their work are related to their own search for personal meaning. Not only does teaching allow them to help others find a place in the world, it enables them to construct an identity as members of a special adult community.

This is not to suggest that Jewish teachers are somehow different from other teachers in their search for personal or collective significance in their work. The argument I want to advance here is, rather, that if, as we found (and as much recent research suggests), the search for meaning is a large part of all teachers' lives, then Jewish schools will be more successful in recruiting and retaining teachers if they organize and market themselves as places capable of offering Jewish teachers multiple sources of meaning.[6]

In this respect, Jewish schools may be better placed to recruit and retain teachers than public boards of education. Our interviewees show that in the most powerful instances, day school work offers an opportunity to connect and integrate many dimensions of selfhood. It involves engaging in a professional life shaped by the rhythms and practices of the Jewish year. It promises membership in a community enriched by a shared culture and distinctive language. It brings opportunities to advance one's own Jewish learning as an adult. And, of course, it offers, each day, the possibility of fulfilling a mission of engaging young people in a Jewish future. Separately, and even more so, collectively, these experiences make work in a Jewish school very different from work in other schools and, perhaps, anywhere else.

The Satisfaction of Working in a Jewish School

Ironically, in recent years, during what has been an admirable drive to professionalize Jewish education, it has been unfashionable to dwell on such differences. The logic of Jewish teacher professionalization has been that if we narrow the gap between teaching and other professions, and between teaching in Jewish schools and work in public school settings, we can improve the quality of teachers' work and also attract more talented young people to Jewish teaching. If, for example, we make licensure requirements more rigorous or if we link salaries to the acquisition of specialized knowledge, we might be more successful at recruiting the brightest and best.

While the rhetoric of professionalization may, then, express a well-intentioned desire to improve the quality of Jewish schools, it serves the cause of teacher recruitment poorly. For if it is hard to distinguish teaching from professions like law and medicine, what special reason is there to become a teacher at lower pay? If the satisfactions that come from working in a Jewish school are much like those of working in a public school setting, why commit to a Jewish institution?

For those we interviewed, working in a Jewish school can be quite different from working in other schools, or any other workplace for that matter. At times, this carries problematic connotations, suggesting that Jewish schools are chaotic places where teachers' lives are subject to unusually intense parental interference. But, perhaps, if Jewish schools cultivate some of the positive differences that distinguish them from other workplaces, this distinctiveness can become a source of strength, providing teachers with persuasive reasons to take up appointments.

Some Material and Financial Considerations

This argument might be taken to suggest that material issues are unimportant in teacher career choices. In fact, our findings demonstrate that extrinsic factors are never fully absent from teachers' career decisions. Indeed, as teachers reflect on their work, they indicate that, with time, material and financial considerations become increasingly important to them. This growing "materialism" probably reflects the way personal financial responsibilities increase over time, but it may also indicate that, because schools have been so poor at

providing others sources of fulfillment, money and status have become more important. Altruism and the pursuit of meaning only go so far when the work is hard and the conditions are challenging. In the long run, therefore, the search for meaning is never fully disconnected from material considerations.

In my work with undergraduate students, I have found this to be the case even at the start of teachers' careers. Over the last 24 months, York has participated in the launch of a promising new teacher recruitment initiative. This project - supported by the Covenant Foundation and by day schools in Edmonton, Vancouver, and Winnipeg - aims to recruit teacher candidates who will, on graduation, take up positions in the Jewish schools of western Canada. Successful applicants receive a partial scholarship towards the costs of joint B.A. and B.Ed. degrees at York before returning to their communities for at least three years as teachers qualified in the fields of both Jewish and general studies.

Evaluations and anecdotal evidence from the first two recruitment cycles indicate that the offer of funding has played a large part in attracting the attention of potential applicants. Those who inquired about the initiative make clear that the promise of scholarships worth half of tuition and living expenses drew them to a Jewish teacher education program that would otherwise have remained out of reach. Without the funding, living away from home in one of Canada's most expensive cities would have been financially prohibitive.

Other Sources of Reward

Yet, for those making the leap from inquiring about the program to applying for admission, it turns out that financial considerations were not the most important concern. Instead, applicants indicate that other sources of reward, such as the opportunity to pursue Jewish study for its own sake, or the prospect of participating in Canada's largest Jewish student community, were greater attractions. Financial incentives may have initially captured their attention, but it was the program's offer of personal rewards that interested them in making a deeper commitment.

These findings are, I take it, good news, even if it seems perverse to counsel optimism at a time of great stress in the educational world. If teachers are so much interested in careers that provide them with a sense of community and with opportunities for personal and professional growth, then Jewish schools might possess significant advantages in recruitment. After all, it is the raison d'être of day school education to engage with multiple realms of meaning, of kodesh (holy) and of chol (secular), and with many layers of identification, from the particular to the universal, in a potent mix rarely present in the same educational setting. If Jewish schools were better prepared to utilize their roles as vehicles of meaning and identity, for adults as well as children, they might find it easier to recruit and retain faculty interested in locating themselves at such intersections.

In a larger sense, my point is that, in addition to seeking to reproduce successful and worthwhile programs from the world of public education, the community should draw on the strengths that make its educational community distinctive. As I have suggested in a variety of other venues, we would better understand these strengths if we listened more carefully to the narratives of people who have committed their lives to teaching in Jewish schools. We might even find that our community is better positioned to survive these challenging times than we had imagined.n

---

Alex Pomson is Koschitzky Professor of Jewish Education in the Faculty of Education, York University

in Toronto. He is the coordinator of York University's Jewish Teacher Education Programme.

Bibliography

1. Hammond, Linda Darling. *Solving the Dilemmas of Teacher Supply, Demand and Standards.* New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2000.

2. Dillon, J. and N. Pyke. "Teacher shortage heads for 20,000" in *The Independent Newspaper*, February 4, 2001.

3. Bullough, Robert Jr. and Kerrie Baughman. *"First-Year Teacher" Eight Years Later: An Inquiry into Teacher Development.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1997; Hansen, David. *The Call to Teach.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1995; Don Hamachek. "Effective teachers: What they do, how they do it, and the importance of self-knowledge" in *The Role of Self in Teacher Development*; Lipka, Richard and Thomas Brinthaupt (eds.). Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999.

4. Kelchtermans, Geert. "Teachers and their Career Story: A biographical perspective on professional development." in *Research on Teacher Thinking: Understanding Professional Development.* Day, Christopher, James Calderhead and Pam Denicolo (eds.). London: Falmer Press, 1993.

5. Pomson, Alex Pomson. "Who is a Jewish Teacher? A narrative inquiry into general studies teaching in Jewish day schools" in *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 77(1): 56-63, 2000; Pomson, Alex. "Interrogating the Rhetoric of Jewish Teacher Professionalization by Drawing on Jewish Teacher Narratives" in the Journal of Jewish Education 65 (1&2): 16-24, 1999.

6. For research on teachers' pursuit of personal meaning in their work, see: Nias, Jennifer. *Primary Teachers Talking: A study of teaching as work.* London: Routledge, 1989; Acker, Sandra. *The Realities of Teachers Work: Never a Dull Moment.* London: Cassell, 1999.