

Starting at the Beginning: Basic Pedagogic Skills for Novice Religious School Teachers

by Diane Zimmerman

The author presents the results of two surveys conducted to help determine the basic skills needed by an avocational religious school teacher.

Teacher training for public school teachers begins in the college or university setting and, as part of the education program, teachers receive their training in basic pedagogic skills and do a teaching practicum. In the supplementary Jewish religious school¹ environment, the majority of teachers do not have any formal teacher training. These teachers are often called “avocational teachers,” as teaching in the religious school is a task done for pleasure, rather than for the necessity of earning a living.

According to a 1997 study of supplementary religious schools in three major metropolitan areas, only thirty-two percent of religious school teachers had any formal training education. Many of the Central Agencies, sponsored by the local Jewish Federations, offer teacher training courses for beginning religious school teachers, and some teachers do participate in these courses. But the majority of teacher training for new religious school teachers becomes the responsibility of the lead staff of the religious school, usually the principal. Mentoring can and should be a tool used to facilitate the growth of the avocational teacher’s basic pedagogic skills, but, first, the question needs to be asked: What basic pedagogic skills does the avocational religious school teacher need? Then the discussion can continue to determine how the use of mentoring can aid the process of developing these skills.

Determining Needed Skills

The method used to determine the basic skills needed by an avocational religious school teacher was structured in four steps. First, to gather background knowledge, education journal articles and books on teacher education were used to become acquainted with the basic pedagogic skills that are used by secular teachers in the field. The second step consisted of contacting the directors and facilitators of existing religious school teacher training programs in two major metropolitan areas to find out which skills were covered in their curriculums. In the third step, two surveys were designed and implemented using the tools on www.surveymonkey.com. The first survey was e-mailed to Washington, D.C., area religious school principals to gather their thoughts on the basic pedagogic skills needed by beginning religious school teachers. The second was e-mailed to first through third year religious school teachers to find out what skills they felt new teachers needed in order to teach effectively in a religious school environment. The final step involved a focus group interview of three novice religious school teachers.

Education books and journals suggest that new teachers need skills in the following areas: lesson planning, classroom management and discipline, diverse learners, student motivation, learning and child development theories, effective teaching strategies, student assessment, special needs, and using media and other technology. The two Jewish teacher training programs investigated teach sessions that cover all of the above skill areas, except for media and technology. They also cover these specific skills: being an effective and reflective teacher, parent-teacher communication, creating the emotional and physical learning environment, teaching techniques and educational games, and how to end the school year. These programs include discussions of the unique culture of a religious school and the use of volunteers in the classroom, which are two issues specific to the supplementary school environment. Both of the Jewish programs include time for the novice teacher to observe effective teachers and to do a practice teaching time. The directors of the programs chose topics to include in the curriculum, based on their own personal assessments of teacher needs (based on their experiences) and how much training time was available to them.

Surveying Principals and Novice Teachers

According to the survey, the Washington, D.C., area religious school principals

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(nineteen completed the survey) wanted their novice teachers to have the following basic pedagogic skills: classroom management and discipline strategies, lesson planning, theories and practices related to Gardner's (1983) *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*,² effective teaching strategies and educational games, assessment and evaluation tools, and ways to communicate effectively with parents. During the learning process, the principals wanted effective questioning and reflective teaching to be covered. On the principals' list of teacher training needs, but less important, were time for the teachers to observe other teachers, help in finding on-line and community resources, ways to create a caring environment, and information on working with special needs children. The principals' list of teaching skills corresponded to those taught in the teacher-training programs. The one difference is that the DC area principals did not feel it was important to spend time teaching child development or learning theories, except for Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*.

The second survey was e-mailed to first through third year religious school teachers, using the communication tools of the Washington, D.C., area principals surveyed. Seventeen teachers completed the survey. Information from the survey was combined with the anecdotal information gleaned from the focus group interview of the three novice religious school teachers. Just as an effective mentor finds out what the mentee wants to work on, the survey and focus group aimed to discover what skills the novice teachers feel are needed in order to be more effective teachers. These teachers were very specific about the skills they would want to learn and suggested areas that directly related to the needs of their current classroom situations. The teachers also shared suggestions on ways to obtain some of these skills.

Most Needed Skill: Classroom Management

Classroom management was clearly the skill that the survey and focus group participants indicated was most needed by new teachers. Classroom management skills mentioned included ways to keep the classroom under control and discipline techniques to use with one or more learners. The next two major areas of concern were teaching strategies, which included meeting the needs of various learners, and lesson planning. Assessing student learning received comments by almost 15% of the survey participants, but was not mentioned by the focus group. Communicating with parents, which included the writing of progress reports, was a need cited in comments on the survey but not in the focus group. This was most likely due to the timing of the survey, which was given when many teachers were writing mid-year progress reports.

Specific comments during the focus group and/or on the surveys related to classroom management issues, focusing on the stress of dealing with disruptive behavior and maintaining control in larger size classrooms. "How to maintain control without yelling or seeming mean" was a concern cited by one teacher on the survey, when asked about skills s/he needed to know prior to the first day of school. Another survey participant wished s/he knew "how to maintain an orderly classroom for a larger class size (greater than twelve or fourteen)". One focus group participant mentioned that many of the behavioral issues

that occur in the classroom are not ones that will have specific solutions and that not having some "tricks" up her sleeve made it difficult to deal with problem students. The first need mentioned by the focus group participants was "help in dealing with special needs students," specifically behavioral and learning issues. They called these children the "high maintenance" students. The focus group felt that new teachers also needed help in the routines of the day and how to manage transition times.

Other Needed Skills

Lesson planning and teaching strategies issues were explained by the participants of the survey and the interviews. The focus group participants said that new teachers needed help in preparing a lesson plan, the timing of a lesson, and, specifically, how to handle a lesson that "doesn't go as well as planned or goes too fast." In regards to teaching strategies, the biggest area of concern was how to meet the needs of the variety of learners in the classroom and a desire to learn about the types of learners. One survey participant said s/he would like to know "how to keep the more advanced students challenged without losing the advanced student while using the same lesson plan." The desire for ways to find more resources for activities and effective learning games were also mentioned. Another survey participant wished s/he knew "more creative ways to teach and keep children interested" prior to the first day of school.

Almost eighty percent of the survey participants, when asked what they wish they knew at this point in time in the teaching year, chose "if my students are really learning the material." Only thirty-three percent of them said that they wanted to know more about developing assessment tools. Assessment issues were not mentioned at all in the focus group.

A few other comments made by the participants are important to note, even though the areas did not receive a large number of responses. One focus group member said that she would like to have a better grasp of the subject matter she is supposed to teach, and this was also articulated by one survey participant. A few teachers mentioned wanting guidance on giving homework assignments and motivating the students to do the assignments. The focus group participants thought new teachers needed more guidance on the scope and sequence of the curriculum, and wanted the specific grade level objectives to be spelled out.

Mentoring and Guidance

The survey and focus group participants shared thoughts on ways to provide teaching skills to new teachers. Almost ninety-five percent of the survey participants felt that it would be helpful to observe an experienced teacher. One teacher felt that having a mentor and/or having a teaching partner who was more experienced and could model good teaching behaviors would be beneficial. One survey participant suggested that there be "some sort of 'sit in' the classroom program for maybe three weeks in which you team teach with an experienced teacher and by the third lesson, you run it yourself..." Another participant suggested that there should be teacher training courses on specific skills needed and staff meetings to brainstorm solutions with other teachers.

A few other basic teacher training skill areas should be added to those suggested by the DC area principals and the novice teachers surveyed. New teachers need guidance in ways to manage the first and second days of school, good ways to end the school year, effective communication skills for that particular school environment and the people within the school (parents, teachers, principal, rabbi, cantor, etc.), and ways to involve parents in classroom learning. They also need someone to help them become familiar with the school's policies and procedures and the curriculum goals for that school. All teachers need to be made aware of opportunities for professional growth and development.

The two surveys and the focus group interview provided insight into the needs of novice teachers. These methods helped highlight the specific areas of concern for new teachers and the reasons for their concern. Teachers were truly concerned about the child who acts up in class, large size classes, and presenting "interesting and fun" lessons. With the help of this information, a religious school principal will be able to target teacher training to meet the needs described by the novice teachers.

Religious School Principals as Mentors

Religious school principals should be aware of their role as mentors of their novice teachers. This mentoring is done directly and indirectly, and, in this role of mentor, religious school principals should encourage the development of basic pedagogic skills. In an indirect mentoring role, principals should consider implementing and/or arranging for novice teacher training workshops, planning regular staff development meetings that include a basic pedagogic skill teaching/learning component, and encouraging the Board of Education to provide teaching books as gifts to teachers and to recognize teaching achievements. Mentors should be found for new teachers, either from within the school environment or, perhaps, within the synagogue membership. The principal's responsibility is then to facilitate the more personal one-on-one relationship between the mentor and novice teacher, with the principal guiding the process.

The mentor assumes a direct role in guiding the novice teacher. The mentor should plan with the novice teacher for the acquisition and practice of basic pedagogic skills in a developmental sequence. The learning plan would be adapted with performance and input from the novice teacher along the way. In order to facilitate the sequential development of skills, the mentor and mentee should have regular meetings that include mentor observation times and pre- and post-observation follow-up conferences. Religious school mentors might also mentor the novice teachers by using dialogue or journaling through e-mail or on paper to encourage the use of reflective teaching skills to change behaviors.

While in the school environment, the principal and the mentor should always remember to model good teaching skills and should consider using demonstration teaching as a way to model skills to the new teacher. When possible, the principal and/or the mentor should arrange for the novice teacher to observe more experienced effective teachers, either in their own school or in another school. Like the mentor, the religious school principal must be encouraging, supportive and remember to recognize the

successes of the novice teacher. Both the mentor and the religious school principal can be a fulcrum that encourages the development of basic teaching skills in the novice teacher.

Starting out in the potentially rewarding position of religious school teacher can be a stressful situation. Religious school principals, as direct and indirect mentors, are in the position to facilitate basic pedagogic skill training to help the new teacher become comfortable in their new jobs. Through guidance, observation opportunities, training programs and mentoring, the new teacher will hopefully grow into a confident and effective transmitter of Jewish knowledge to the students. ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. In this article, the terms "supplementary school" and "religious school" are used interchangeably to refer to Jewish religious education that occurs outside of the time frames of secular school hours, usually after school and/or on Sundays.
2. Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: BasicBooks, 1983.

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