

A Learning Community's Adult Members

Steven Lorch

I HAVE THE GREAT FORTUNE of working in a school that takes learning seriously. We articulate this in our mission, “to cultivate textpeople,” and we believe, and act as though we believe, that children can be active and engaged learners all the time. We further believe that one of the keys to student learning is whether they see the adults in the community — their teachers, their parents, the school’s leadership — taking their own learning seriously, too. Children can sense whether we are truly passionate about our learning or just going through the motions. So, in our school, adult learners have a continuous challenge: to find learning problems unsettling, to set themselves learning tasks that will call upon all their intellectual and emotional resources, and to produce wonderfully exciting ideas.

The following are guideposts from the research literature and our own experiences with adult learning:

- Adults work on tasks that are specific enough to stimulate engaged thinking, but flexible and open-ended enough to stimulate creativity, absorption, and emotional intensity.
- Adults make use of their own practical knowledge and experience to filter new ideas.
- When adult learners face a problem they don’t know how to solve, they develop skills to pursue inquiry, they generate and use evidence, and they identify and seek out resources to solve the problem.
- Adults dialogue with other learners to share ideas, pool resources, and solve problems together. They develop sustained relationships with other learners that enable them to achieve emotional understanding, in addition to intellectual understanding, and observe others to evaluate their own performance.
- Adults participate in a supportive learning community that promotes trust, confidence, risk-taking, innovation, and perseverance in the face of setbacks.

Each adult constituency — new teachers, veteran teachers, parents, and trustees — re-

quires specifically designed learning activities that reflect these principles.

New teachers need to understand as quickly as possible what is meant by engaged and passionate learning. Brought together for two weeks of orientation before their classroom responsibilities commence, new teachers look at case studies of teaching practice, read about and make sense of big ideas, reflect on their previous experiences as teachers and students, and apply these insights to new challenges. They work in small groups, study text together, engage in role-plays, pose and answer their own questions, and reflect on the personal significance of what they are learning. By the end of the orientation period, they have learned to work well together, become partners in an ongoing conversation about educational ideas and practice, and begun to understand the school’s expectations for learning and the roles they will play in advancing and upholding it.

Once the school year begins, the school continues to help new teachers learn and adjust in three additional ways:

- We pair new teachers with experienced co-teachers; they spend the entire year together in class planning, teaching, evaluating, and reflecting.
- As a pilot school in The AVI CHAI Foundation’s New Teacher Initiative, we train mentor teachers who observe, support, and guide some of the new teachers in their first two years.
- We create opportunities for new teachers to share their experiences as a group.

All teachers run the risk of becoming immersed in their students’ learning needs to the point of neglecting themselves as learners. To remind and re-engage them, we involve them in a wide variety of learning activities each year that include both personal tasks and school-wide group experiences. Twice a year, each teacher sets personal professional development goals and action plans collaboratively with a supervisor and works, with the supervisor’s support, to carry them out. In addition, there are twelve professional de-

velopment days over the course of the year, as well as weekly faculty meetings, during which the teachers work together on school-wide learning priorities. These priorities vary from year to year; this year, they include gathering data on our teaching practices and reflecting on their implications, archiving and recording curriculum units, expanding and extending curriculum resources in math, looking at teaching Jewish holidays from a variety of cultural and religious perspectives, and becoming more proficient in using and teaching computer applications.


Parents have chosen our school because they value the kind of active learning we promote for our students. We therefore offer them workshops that are similarly designed to reflect what we know about how they, too, can learn actively:

- workshops on educational and developmental issues of broad general interest such as the pros and cons of external standards, and health and nutritional issues pertaining to school lunches
- curriculum workshops, in which parents experience how different subject matter (e.g., Hebrew, or writing) is taught to their children
- child development workshops, in which age-specific developmental challenges are discussed and explored
- *Beit Midrash* sessions, in which parents engage in *Torah lishmah*.

In all the workshops, parents engage in four activities that reflect principles of adult learning: first, actively engaging in group learning tasks with other parents; second, relating this

learning to their earlier learning experiences as they were growing up; third, exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the practices they just experienced; and, fourth, reflecting on the implications of the type of learning they just engaged in for their children's daily experience of school.

Trustees hold in their hands the school's character and direction. The more they experience for themselves the serious learning in which students engage, the better able they are to promote and advance the school's commitment to this kind of education in their deliberations and decisions. This year, we introduced a monthly lunchtime *beit midrash* where trustees — and their friends — with widely differing Jewish educational backgrounds gather to puzzle over the classical texts of our tradition. This is not a traditional *shiur* in which someone teaches and the learners follow along and ask questions; it is an active paired (*chevruta*) or small-group learning experience in which the learners delve beneath the surface of the text and, supported by guiding questions and a facilitator, uncover for themselves the deep meanings and profound ideas that a close reading of the sources reveals. Over time, we are beginning to create shared values and norms of learning around the board table that are transforming the mission and vision of the school from a theoretical notion to a palpable personal experience.

We believe that everything flows from an accurate appreciation of how learners learn. When adults learn well, student learning is also enhanced. School communities that care about how their students learn will benefit from making provisions for the learning needs of their adult constituencies. 

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Transforming Early Education

Ilene C. Vogelstein

SOME BELIEVE the Jewish community is hemorrhaging. Tourniquets have been placed everywhere and are working with limited success. But applying bandages will not solve the problem in the long term. A cure will require new and imaginative efforts in areas that heretofore have not been exploited. As Michael Steinhardt said at the 2003 UJC General Assembly, "the reward for taking chances is far greater than the risks."

Early childhood education is one of those

areas. Since the 1940s, Jewish early childhood programs for children two through six years of age have been places where mostly mothers — especially those working out of their homes — have entrusted the care of their children. Loving professionals watched and nurtured the next generation as if they were their own children. These women, many with professional degrees, worked for minimum wages because the hours were flexible, they loved children, and they felt they were contributing