

## “It Feels Different Working Here!” The Elusive Influence of Context On Teacher Retention in Jewish Day Schools

by Alex Pomson

During the 1960s sociologist Frederick Herzberg established an influential paradigm for career research. Based on a study of engineers and accountants in Pittsburgh, Herzberg argued that the causes of job satisfaction were substantially independent of those of job dissatisfaction.<sup>1</sup> In his view, the sources of job satisfaction (such as achievement and responsibility) were intrinsic to the nature of work, while the causes of job dissatisfaction (such as long hours or low salary) derived mainly from the context in which work was done. Raising salary (removing a “dissatisfyer,” in Herzberg’s terms) did not provide a reason for taking up or remaining in a job. It served only as a “hygiene factor” that reduced job dissatisfaction.

Although derived from the study of engineers and accountants, Herzberg’s “two-factor” motivation/hygiene hypothesis has been a staple of educational management courses for more than thirty years. Under the influence of his research, it has been argued that the reasons to become and remain a teacher are associated with the intrinsic rewards in teaching, concentrated within the teaching act and in the relationship between students and teachers. Extrinsic or contextual factors (such as the terms and conditions of work) not only lie beyond the classroom, but also beyond the teacher’s own internal world. From this point of view, recruitment and retention hinge on maximizing what Dan Lortie called “the psychic rewards of teaching”, not on material conditions which have little influence on employment choice.

Applying Herzberg’s thesis to the interpretation of teachers’ career choices has intuitive appeal: it affirms that people become teachers because they want to teach and not because of material remuneration; it acknowledges that teaching is difficult but satisfying work; and it values a view of teaching as calling over teaching as career. Despite the rhetorical attractiveness of these ideas, I want to argue that they do not help us think clearly about the complex question of why teachers enter or remain in the classroom. In the first place, they assume that teaching is directly comparable to other kinds of work, and, secondly, they distract our attention from sources of satisfaction in teachers’ work that can exert great influence on career decisions.

My argument is informed by research conducted by a team at York University into the career choices of day school teachers in Toronto; first and foremost, however, it is shaped by the work of two scholars who have challenged Herzberg’s thesis from different directions. In a 1990 study of American teachers, Sylvia Yee questioned the assumption that sources of job dissatisfaction are not intrinsic to the act of teaching.<sup>2</sup> Yee showed that the teaching act is itself at the heart of both the most satisfying and least satisfying aspects of teachers’ work. The teaching experience is sometimes so brutal that it drives teachers away from the classroom. From a different perspective, Jennifer Nias showed that contextual factors are decisive in determining a teacher’s sense of self.<sup>3</sup> In a study of British primary school teachers, Nias pointed to a variety of factors (such as administration, staff relations, and government policy) which in other occupations may relate to job context, but which, in schools, are intimately bound up with the nature of the work itself. Taken together, Yee and Nias’ work shows that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the act of teaching (and its decisive satisfactions) and the context in which teaching occurs.

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In our research at York, we have taken up this conclusion in order to determine whether there are special features in the day school context beyond the walls of the classroom that provide people with reasons to become and remain teachers. Differently put, we wanted to know whether there are “contextual satisfyers” that are unique to the day school environment. We hoped that if we could identify such features, they might play a significant role in teacher recruitment and retention strategies, at a time when there is an acute teacher shortage everywhere.

In this piece, I should like to point to four features of the day school context that serve as powerful sources of satisfaction and frustration for teachers. These, of course, are not the only things that effect the decision to become and remain teachers. The suggestion is that these (unlike other factors such as parental involvement or management style) exert force only in the day school context. If we can, therefore, make sense of how these influences operate, we might be able to mobilize them in the cause of day school teacher retention.

### 1. Cross-curricula partnerships (Chevre)

One of the commonplaces of research into teachers’ professional lives is that in most schools teachers work behind closed doors in the insulated environment of their own classrooms. Generally, therefore, scholars have debated not the reality of teacher isolation, but rather its causes, and the extent to which these are structural or psychological<sup>4</sup>

One of the most pervasive features of day schools is that teachers do not work in isolation. Teachers from Grade 1 up share their students with at least one colleague. The dual curriculum of Jewish and general studies means that teachers must negotiate the dimensions of the classroom environment with a partner chosen for them in an arranged match.

Our research indicates that the relationship with one’s curriculum partner can be a source either of great satisfaction or of deep disappointment. For many, this relationship takes on the intensity and intimacy more commonly associated with the relationships of private life. This is with one significant difference: teachers have little control over their choice of partner. In positive instances, research participants describe how they have found themselves partnered with a more experienced individual who served as a role model. Others have been paired with a peer who became a fellow traveler. In painful instances, interviewees report how they have been obstructed, undermined or simply ignored by a poorly matched colleague.

The dual day school curriculum of Judaic and general studies is frequently viewed as a major source of stress, forcing teachers to shoehorn a day of work into a few short hours. Yet, the bifurcated day may provide a benefit. Forced into cross-curricular partnerships by the structure of the program, teachers find themselves participating in relationships which, fortuitously, provide an opportunity to counter the isolation and creeping infantilism in the classroom that plague teachers in most schools. These relationships can have a strong effect on job satisfaction. It implies that schools might have greater success retaining teachers if they allowed them to have some say in determining their cross-curricular partners.

### 2. A working life shaped by the rhythms of the Jewish year

David Hartman has argued that only in Israel can Jews feel anything other than socially marginal.<sup>5</sup> There, one experiences how the Jewish liturgical calendar shapes the collective identity of the nation. Ironically, while teachers often struggle to communicate to their students that Judaism is more than a private pastime, participants in our studies indicate that work in a Jewish day school provides them with a visceral appreciation for the routines and rhythms of Jewish identity of the kind Hartman describes.

In mundane terms, the organization of the school year around the Jewish calendar offers a level of convenience not reproduced in many other workplaces. Day school teachers have enough time to return home for Shabbat, and need not ask for special permission to take days off for the chaggim (Jewish holidays). More profoundly, the rhythms of the Jewish week and of the yearly cycle help teachers construct a sense of personal location that comes from belonging to a distinct community with its own routines.

The outstanding example of this is the festival of Pesach, which requires an extensive investment of curriculum time at school and of personal time at home. One participant in our study reported how in her school, teachers and board members have never agreed about how many calendar days to take off before Pesach. Board members argue that if other respectable professionals don't have the liberty of taking time to prepare for the festival, why should teachers. For teachers – one of our interviewees explained - this misses the point. Jewish schools are not (or at least should not be) like other workplaces. It is when they reflect and relate to the contours of the Jewish year that they become desirable places to work.

### 3. Sharing a special language

The Toronto Jewish day school system, where this research was conducted, is among a minority of communities in North America where the teaching of Ivrit b'Ivrit (Jewish studies in Hebrew) is the norm rather than the exception. This contextual fact is rooted in a distinctive social system whose culture and history originates beyond the particular workplaces of research participants. Yet, it impinges on their professional commitments and self-understanding in acute and immediate fashion.

Almost all the participants in our research indicated that the role of Hebrew in the curriculum has a profound impact on their deepest motivations. For many non-native Hebrew speakers, the opportunity to teach in Hebrew provides one of the most compelling reasons to teach in a Jewish day school.

Participants' assessment of their special qualifications and of the potential to make a difference in students' lives substantiates a claim made by Jonathan Sarna in a history of Jewish education in America.<sup>6</sup> For Sarna, the Ivrit Be-Ivrit movement overwhelmed – kidnapped, he says - mainstream Jewish education in the United States during the 1930s. In so doing, it transformed the self-esteem of Jewish educators. "Ivrit Be-Ivrit elevated lowly teachers, making them feel part of the most significant movement in Jewish life. Devoted Jewish teachers believed with all their heart and soul that the future of American Jewish life depended on them."<sup>7</sup>

This is a precise summation of what drives North American-born teachers who can employ a body of special knowledge with skill and effect. Their mission to show students that North Americans can master Hebrew drives them to tolerate a range of discomforts that come from being a non-Israeli minority among their colleagues. Sarna's account also indicates why those who have struggled with Hebrew feel discomfort in their work. If they do not have a critical measure of competence, they come to question their professional worth

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The place of Hebrew in the day school curriculum is not simply a technical aspect of teachers' work. System-wide norms and policies for the teaching of Hebrew are freighted with so much political and historical significance that teachers find this issue testing their fundamental interests and motivations. If educational policy-makers and administrators are to tackle the challenges of recruitment and retention with success they must consider the extent to which Hebrew can motivate and deter teachers in their work.

#### 4. Becoming a parent

There are few human experiences that have greater effect on the way we function in the world than the experience of becoming a parent. Career researchers have long been alert to the conflicted relationship between commitments to family and work. In recent years, feminist scholars have, however, subverted the dichotomizing of teachers' personal and professional commitments and paid more attention to the profound but radically unpredictable impact of parenthood on teachers' practice.<sup>8</sup>

Our research demonstrates how unpredictable this impact can be. Parenting is differently experienced, and the differences inform teachers' values in diverse ways. Nevertheless, as Patricia Sikes has shown in a study of "Parents Who Teach" that parent teachers draw upon a common cultural repertoire to talk about such things as the way they see their own children reflected in their pupils, their increased patience, tolerance and empathy, [and] the effect that their professional training has had upon them as parents".<sup>9</sup>

Day school teachers draw on these same cultural reference points. Yet, in one respect at least, the particular context of day school work seems to modify the influence of these generalized patterns. For some day school teachers, becoming a parent, leads them to ask of themselves not only is this how I want my own children to be taught but is this where I want them taught. They wonder: if this is not where I want them taught, is it where I want to teach.

Day schools are private institutions, and they take a variety of denominational and ideological forms, each giving expression to a particular vision of Jewish identity. When teachers become parents (and as their children age) they are prompted, unlike peers in public schools, to assess the fit between their personal and professional identity. As Harvey Goldberg has shown, where one's children attend school is a strong way of giving expression to the particular content of one's own adult Jewish identity.<sup>10</sup> Becoming a parent not only disrupts the routines of one's work habits, it uncovers previously unacknowledged inconsistencies between the personal and professional. This may have disruptive or affirmative consequences for career commitments.

#### Implications for schools

Research into teachers' lives is often organized around the poles of calling and career, and of vocation and work. This is not altogether surprising. Teachers are driven over the course of their careers by a vocational urge. It is tempting, therefore, to view everything else as a matter of context with little effect on the teacher's sense of self.

Yet, as our findings confirm, context – whether in schools or in the wider educational landscape - contributes considerable meaning to teachers' lives. Context is the source of satisfactions that can sustain teachers over the

course of a career and of experiences that can challenge some of their deepest beliefs about themselves. I have argued in this piece that there are some aspects of the day school context that make teaching different and sometimes more satisfying than work in other schools, and perhaps, any other kind of workplace.

Inevitably, given that schools exist first and foremost to meet the needs of children, little attention has been given to how the day school context shapes teachers' lives. Even when teachers and their employers negotiate collective agreements, such matters do not attract attention. As I have argued in a previous piece in Jewish Education News, however, it is reasonable to expect that if Jewish schools organize and market themselves as environments in which teachers will find multiple sources of satisfaction, they will have more success recruiting and retaining teachers. They may, in fact, be better placed to recruit and retain teachers than we ever imagined.

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### Endnotes

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