

Why Good Teachers Matter: Raising the Bar in Jewish Education

Miriam Hirsch :: 9/12/2019



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Becoming certified as a public school teacher involves clear requirements and expectations to ensure teacher quality, yet the concept of teacher quality in Jewish day schools and *yeshivot* is at best intuitive and at worst ignominious.

What does it mean for a teacher in a public school to be “qualified?” On the state level, teaching candidates must complete an accredited Educator Preparation Program (EPP), take special workshops in child abuse, school violence and prevention, and other areas, and pass various certification tests. They then have to complete an approved master’s degree within a certain time frame in order to receive permanent certification (five years in New York State).

Beyond academic knowledge, teachers are expected to be trained in general classroom management and assessment practices, child development, psychology and educational foundations of social-emotional learning, among other areas. The coursework is accompanied by 100 clinical field hours leading to a semester of student teaching. Student teachers who do not meet these expectations are counseled out of the program or given guidance in the areas where they need to improve. In their first place of employment, new teachers are assigned mentors who advise and assist them.

How do I know all of this? I serve as chair of a nationally accredited New York State EPP, and I guide teacher candidates towards initial certification in early childhood and childhood education. While this pipeline may be imperfect, it nevertheless brings new teachers into the field with knowledge, support and personalized feedback.

Can we promote professionalism in our schools? I believe we can.

In the world of Jewish education, however, since certification does not exist, the notion of qualifications is elusive. To be sure, there are many, many dedicated, talented teachers who are warm, knowledgeable and idealistic, and are excellent educators. Additionally, they passionately devote their lives to educating our children in the way of Torah. We should be eternally grateful to them, and I hope my words are not taken as an attack on our wonderful educators or school system, which is, for the most part, doing a stellar job in educating our children.

Notwithstanding the impressive achievements of our day schools and *yeshivot*, various flaws do exist and should be addressed. The notion, for example, that one knows how to teach because one knows how to learn is especially persistent in day schools and *yeshivot*. The archetype of the *rebbe*/teacher figure with encyclopedic knowledge and virtuous character, lacking professionalized pedagogic training, is prevalent in our school system.¹

Between 2006 and 2011, I was involved in a research project (subsequently published²) where I examined almost 100 school “stories” authored by former day school and yeshivah students about their schooling experiences. Approximately one-third of the narratives discussed meaningful schooling experiences of personal growth and life-long learning. An additional third discussed instances in which caring teachers positively impacted their lives. However, one-third of the writers described how teachers shamed, humiliated, disgraced or shunned them. Two thirds reported an overall positive and happy day school/yeshivah experience, which is impressive. However, I would like to focus on one third of the narratives that detailed negative, unpleasant experiences in the hope that our schools can improve.

For example, one candidate recollected being called a “blabbermouth” in front of the entire class; another remembered her teacher commenting aloud as he returned her paper, “You did horribly on this test. I don’t understand how someone could lack so much knowledge on a topic. Did you even study?” Sarah recalled her fourth-grade teacher’s response to her missing homework:

She sat down in a chair next to me and rummaged through my bag. To my horror, she pulled out the empty homework sheet and showed it to the class. I was red with embarrassment, but what could I do? Mrs. X. then began a five-minute speech claiming I was exactly what students should not be like and that the penalty for my actions would be severe. Mrs. X. also called me “bad” and “not a good example to follow.” Her eyes peered into mine with fury, as if there was fire burning from them because she was so furious with me.

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Some of the stories told of school environments with intense testing, humiliating insults and unpredictable and bizarre teacher behavior, such as the teacher who threw jawbreaker candies at children. Students told of being chewed out because of dress code violations. Several of the stories described teachers that engaged in practices such as manipulating, favoring or shaming students. Often students felt helpless and powerless. “The school knew what kind of things went on in the classroom . . . but did nothing to rectify the situation.” True, while these stories do not seem to reflect the majority of our children’s experiences, there is enough evidence indicating that such failings within our day schools and *yeshivot* do exist.

In fact, many of these concerns boil down to one issue: a lack of professionalism in our schools. Note for example that while hiring, mentoring and evaluation practices vary from school to school, these processes are often informal or irregular in most of our schools. Contracts are not always prepared: “We had a verbal agreement.” Too often schools pull the dual curriculum card to explain every missing piece. (“Well, we have double the amount of content; we don’t have time for that.”) However, the lack of professionalism found in some Jewish day schools and *yeshivot* actually decreases efficiency of the organization, thereby increasing time allotment necessary to manage messes that emerge from the “*heimish*” environment.

Can we professionalize Jewish education? Yes, by focusing on the following areas of change:

1. Demonstrate Respect for the Field of Education: Clearly, there is no substitute for first-hand teaching experience in the classroom, but that doesn’t mean that the discipline of education has no knowledge, strategies or insight to guide educational practice. At a back-to-school night at a day school, I heard one teacher proudly exhort that *she had no degree in education* but had taught successfully for many years. Would anyone go to a doctor who exclaimed that he was practicing medicine without a license or advanced training? Would anyone hire an electrician, train conductor or accountant who had not invested in their field by learning the concepts, principles and skills? Education is a discipline that educators, of all people, should respect. Educators should avoid demeaning their own profession as if that is a mark of authenticity. Credentials are never the entire story in any field, but they need to play more of a central role in Jewish education. Jewish educators who dismiss advanced learning in their field send the absolute wrong messages to students: “I don’t care enough about my job or you to improve my teaching or your learning.”

Even worse, the hubris seems to assert: “I know everything there is to know about teaching and learning.” If Jewish educators demean the connection between teaching and learning, then so will their students.

2. Insist Upon Formal Contracts. No teacher, assistant teacher, principal or assistant principal should start his or her job without a contract that clearly states salary, expectations and responsibilities. Administrators and boards need to stop telling young teachers that they “really don’t need a contract; don’t you trust us? We are all *frum* here.” Many *rabbanim*, *mechanchim* and school board members have had their lives and the lives of their families upended on these loose and tenuous claims. In fact, the educational organization and the educator are shown respect through the formalization of the commitment between them. Documentation of the arrangement evinces its import. (This is not the place to discuss contractual issues related to gender wage disparities, marital status or nepotism, but suffice it to say they exist.) Negotiation and communication in these areas can be sensitive, but we cannot avoid difficult conversations if we want to improve the teaching and learning in our schools.

3. Promote Professionalism. What does it mean to be a professional? Many years ago, someone asked me what I did. I explained that I was teaching secular studies in the afternoon in a yeshivah and working on my master’s degree in curriculum and teaching. “And that is what you want to do?” he asked. The gentleman in question worked for a Jewish institution of higher education. I was mortified at the time, and rendered speechless. Today I would answer him, “I am a professional educator, it is a noble calling. How can it be that you work for a university and do not appreciate the importance of properly educating the next generation, many of whom will ultimately be your students?”

Within my children’s experiences attending Jewish day schools, we have had amazing teachers who inspired, motivated and pushed them in powerful and meaningful directions with passion, insight and creativity. Unfortunately, we have also had teachers who used class time to complete tax forms and make personal calls on their cell phones. One teacher assigned only one short paper the whole year, lost my daughter’s work, and gave her an F. No doubt, we all have these tales of wonder and woe. But let’s remind ourselves that teaching is a noble calling; if a teacher in a Jewish day school or yeshivah cannot find nobility in this calling, then please let him find another job better suited to his strengths and weaknesses.

Can we show respect to the discipline of education? Can we insist on formal contracts? Can we promote professionalism? I believe we can, if we start the conversation and begin to address these concerns. Let’s set a higher standard and raise the bar for Jewish education.

Notes

1. Alex Pomson, “The rebbe reworked: An inquiry into the persistence of inherited traditions of teaching,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 18 (2002): 25.

2. This article is adapted from my published study “Jewish Day School Wounds and What We Can Do About Them,” which appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Education* 83, no. 4 (2017): 367-392.

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