

Who I Interviewed and Why

I interviewed a 4th grade Judaic studies teacher, Dee (name changed to assure privacy), who has been teaching at the same congregational school for a number of years. She is recognized by her principal and her colleagues as an exemplary teacher.

Lesson Summary

The lesson was about friendship and the qualities or characteristics that students look for in a friend. Dee told me in our post-observation conversation that this lesson was done in response to a parent request to address issues that were occurring between students in prior class sessions. There had been a previous lesson with a similar focus earlier in the year.

Questions I Asked and Why

- Tell me about how you planned for the start of the lesson.
I was very interested in how Dee chose to initiate the lesson. She had started with a very clear statement to the students: "Today's topic will be 'friendship' and what are qualities you look for in a friend." She very explicitly framed where the lesson was going. The topic was one that is of high-interest to this age group. The Judaic content was not explicitly mentioned. I was curious to learn more about whether Dee started all lessons with such a clear goal statement and, if so, how she felt that influenced student focus. This was especially interesting to me since there were a lot of students speaking out and moving about in the classroom during the lesson, especially while Dee was trying to share. However, the same students were more often than not still responding to questions and their talk was related to the topic at hand. While their behavior appeared to be off-topic and distracting, there was still a lot of work and discussion done on the topic of friendship.
- I noticed that you brought in the Jewish connections to the topic in the last 15 minutes of the class. Tell me about your thinking about how and when you help students make that "Jewish connection."

As helping students make connections between daily life and Jewish life is a core component of my work, and that of many others, I wanted to learn more about how Dee structured this into her lesson. Is this a model she uses often? How does she think about helping students make these connections? Dee stated she herself is very personally and spiritually connected to the ideas and concepts that she shares with her students. She wants to help students see these life ideas and Jewish ideas in a larger context outside of the classroom. She is also looking to reinforce how the current learning connects to prior (text) study. She often starts with something that is a part of the students' lives first, then connects it to something [Jewish] that they have studied previously.

- I noticed that at one point there was a point system on the board, can you tell me more about that system.
- I saw a young man who was having trouble sitting in his chair and monitoring his verbal comments. You let inappropriate comments go until he talked about the trash bag, then you used his example, which appeared to be off-topic, as a positive example. It was a fantastic teaching moment. Were you conscious of that decision? Talk some more about that moment.

There was a lot going on in the classroom when I visited. There were students coming in and out to see the Hebrew tutor. There was a student repeatedly drawing attention to himself through verbal and physical outbursts. Dee did not use her point system until over half way through the lesson. I was curious about how she used it, when she decided to use it, and how she felt it worked for her and the students. She shared quite a bit about how she managed the system to reinforce positive behaviors and actions and discourage negative ones. Her patience was extraordinary and she only deducted points when she felt she was being purposefully disrespected or that the classroom environment (physical and emotional) was becoming unsafe for all the students. She made the distinction between deducting points for this vs. deducting for a student seeking negative attention.

- I noticed that you managed a lot of things going on at the same time, yet you maintained a flow throughout the lesson. Do you have a sense of that when you are teaching?
- You used a chart, discussion, and role play, seemed like nice way to plan for different kinds of learning. Tell me about that. Do you do that in every lesson?

Dee was unflappable, stuck with her lesson plan, and involved many students in many different ways (discussion, charting, skit). I was curious about how she thought about managing all these many components in a lesson.

- You've said that you didn't feel the lesson went well. Can you tell me more about your thoughts on that?
- If you do the lesson again, what would you change?

Dee was very reflective on her teaching from the minute the observation ended, before we even scheduled time to talk. She frequently mentioned she felt the lesson "wasn't one of her best." I wanted to give her a chance to share her thoughts, feel supported in her reflection, and use this as a point to try out supporting and challenging on the areas she was focused on.

Questions that Worked Well

The questions that were about pre-planned parts of the lesson that related to the creation of a relational learning community (the point system to encourage safe and respectful behavior, the choice of using a variety of learning styles) led to the most fruitful conversation with Dee. She was able to describe her thinking on these items and answer follow-up questions very clearly. She noted that her

motivation is to create a compassionate classroom and she is very conscious of the tone she is setting for and with the students. These are also the components of the lesson that Dee is most personally connected to. It was harder for Dee to elaborate on her "on the spot" decision making. She frequently referenced how it "felt" and that she "just knows." It was difficult for me to reword the questions to help her translate the "I do it because it just feels right" into "It feels right because of 'X'."

Use of the Observational Record

I used the observational record, along with an audio recording of the lesson, to find themes in Dee's instructional practice. I looked for patterns in her interactions with students and strategies she used to share content and help students interact with the content. Pairing my notes with the recording was particularly helpful for separating interpretations from observations. If I questioned any of my notes, I went back to the recording to clarify.

Reflection (What I Learned)

Dee is already a reflective teacher. She spends considerable time planning her time with her students and thinking about lessons after she implements them. For Dee, the hard part is making the "feelings of rightness" in her teaching more concrete and visible to herself and as a model for other teachers. When I asked her about this process, she was very open to the idea of being observed, but wasn't sure she would want to observe anyone else. For me, I am hoping to become more adept at asking the right questions to help teachers make their own teaching visible. I wonder if Dee watched a clip of her own teaching as part of the conversation if that would be helpful or not.

Certainly, in the moment, supporting is easier than challenging. Even supporting when I didn't agree. After the observation, I had written lots of notes next to my observations of the students and their ways of responding to Dee. When I asked her about when she decided to use the point system, I was very careful not to ask "why didn't you use it sooner," but instead ask for her retelling of how she uses it. This removed my judgement that it could have been used sooner from the question. This was a great practical application of what we had practiced in MTEI. However, I don't think that I challenged Dee enough because I saw a lot of aspects of her teaching that did work well in the classroom. I could have pushed her more to think about how ignoring the extra comments from the one student, while working for him, still left many students waiting as she continued to attend to his behavior many, many times throughout the session. In hindsight, it would have been good to help her think about how quieter students might have been experiencing the class.

This process, in conjunction with the assignment to lead a conversation about the Susan video, have been an important part of how I'm expanding the kinds of professional development that I do with educators. While the majority of the work that I've done in the past has been leading group professional development, those sessions would be made more powerful by parallel teacher observations and conversations with the individuals participating in the courses. Taking a reflective stance instead of an evaluative stance keeps the focus on the teaching, not the teacher.