

---

## TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONGREGATIONAL SETTINGS<sup>1</sup>

Susan Stodolsky  
*University of Chicago*  
*Chicago, Illinois*

Gail Zaiman Dorph  
*Mandel Teacher Educator Institute*  
*Tiburon, California*

Wendy Rosov  
*Jewish Education Service of North America*  
*New York, New York*

---

### ***Abstract***

This article describes the impact of sustained professional development programs in two Jewish congregational schools. This research suggests that contrary to common assumptions, part-time teachers in Jewish congregational schools *will* invest time in professional development when it is of high quality, interactive and engaging and based at their school. These programs have significantly affected teacher collegiality, knowledge of pedagogy and Jewish content, and reflection about teachers' own teaching practices and practice of Judaism. The role of the educational leader is a salient feature of the program success.

The country is abuzz with calls for improving teacher quality by enhancing teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach and improving their pedagogical strategies and understanding (Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden 2005). Recent educational research suggests that the development of professional learning communities in schools, in conjunction with on-going professional development, can support and sustain a common vision for student learning, enhance the pedagogical skills and content knowledge of teachers, and enhance teacher

---

<sup>1</sup>The research upon which the article is based was generously funded by the Mandel Foundation. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agency. We thank Sharon Feiman-Nemser for comments on the article and Mindy Hepner for editorial suggestions.

collegiality. This article focuses on the relevance of this approach to Jewish congregational schools.

Professional learning communities are founded on constructive dialogue among teachers and on-going face to face contact regarding the core work of the school. Such dialogue can include developing consensus on the school mission, shared planning of instruction and educational programs, talking about teaching and learning through the study of classroom videotapes, and observing one another's teaching. Thus, a professional learning community exists when a group of teachers in a school carries out "joint work" that serves student learning (Little 1987).

The difficulty in significantly raising the levels of teacher knowledge and teacher relationships among full-time, professionally prepared teachers has been widely shown. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) urges that schools "make ongoing professional development part of teachers' daily work through joint planning, research, curriculum and assessment work, study groups, and peer coaching" (86). Research findings (Bryk and Schneider 2002) corroborate this recommendation. Sustained and substantial programs of professional development and committed leadership are primary ingredients for school improvement.

Improving teaching in Jewish congregational schools—all of which are part-time<sup>2</sup>—would seem to present even more challenges. Yet the need for teacher development and joint learning is as great (or greater) than in the public sector. In Jewish settings,<sup>3</sup> not only are congregational teachers part-time, but the whole school faculty is unlikely to follow the same teaching schedule. Within a given school some teachers never cross paths; even those with the same schedule may have little opportunity to meet each other. Teachers are often at school only when their classes are in session, coming and going in tandem with the students. Thus, the structure of the congregational school seems to be a prescription for extreme teacher isolation. A study of Jewish

---

<sup>2</sup>Children attend programs in such schools 1, 2, or 3 times a week. Typical patterns of attendance: Younger children attend for about 2–2 1/2 hours; children 9 and older attend 2 or 3 times a week (4–6 hours).

<sup>3</sup>In many mainline Protestant settings, teaching is seen as a volunteer ministry. To qualify as a teacher, one needs faith, knowledge of the Bible, and care for children. Professional development would be a non-sequitur because of the centrality of the volunteer aspect of the enterprise. These same norms obtain in most Catholic settings although there may be some variation from one archdiocese to the next.

afternoon schools in Boston reported that only 29% of teachers experienced regular collegial contact (Stodolsky et al. 2006).

Teachers in congregational schools have a variety of educational backgrounds. Some may be certified teachers or teach in other settings, whereas others have no teacher education and experience. Similarly, the depth of Jewish content knowledge among these teachers is highly variable, in part reflecting differences in Jewish educational background in childhood and adolescence. Some congregational teachers are college students who will only teach for a few years; others see their work as a career, albeit a part-time one with limited remuneration (Gamoran et al. 1998). Congregational teachers frequently resist participating in professional development of substantial duration, especially if it requires considerable time for which they are not paid (e.g., NESS 2006).

### **THIS STUDY**

This study examines two sustained professional development programs initiated by the principals of Jewish congregational schools for their faculty. Both principals attended MTEI (Mandel Teacher Educator Institute), a two-year, national professional development program whose goal is to prepare principals and consultants in Jewish schools to design and implement site-based learning opportunities for their teachers. Both principals led seminars in which their teachers gathered for 2 to 3 hours of professional development between 5 and 8 times a year. One program was in its ninth year and the other in its second.

This article describes each of the programs, reports faculty members' perceptions of the impact of participation, and the researchers' impression of the congruence of faculty reports with their own school and classroom observations. Similarities and differences in the programs and in their reported impact are discussed. The contextual and programmatic features that may have contributed to the reported outcomes are also considered. While this study is exploratory it is also an existence proof demonstrating the willingness and enthusiasm of part-time teachers to engage in serious, long-term professional development as well as the importance of committed and knowledgeable leadership.

### **METHOD**

Data for the two case studies were obtained through site visits, interviews with teachers and the principal, informal classroom

observations, and analysis of various documents including seminar lesson plans. The work of one of the principals, Brenda, was first studied in 2001 from the point of view of her growth as a facilitator of professional development (Stodolsky et al. 2002). Four years later researchers interviewed seven of twelve teachers who participated in the seminar; observed one seminar session, read a transcript of another, observed several religious school classes; reviewed documents including lesson plans for the seminars across nine years; and conducted lengthy, semi-structured interviews with Brenda before and after the seminar session. In the case of Lucy, researchers made two site visits—sat in on the professional development seminar each time; interviewed six of ten teachers about the impact of the seminar; conducted lengthy semi-structured interviews before and after each seminar with Lucy; and reviewed seminar lesson plans.

In both settings, we tape-recorded and transcribed the professional development seminars and interviews. Transcripts were coded for statements regarding the program experience and its impact as well as patterns of participation. For example, sections of text were identified as describing program impact, program process, teachers' reports of change in thinking or behavior and statements about goals. Research findings were derived inductively.

The central research questions were:

1. What impact, if any, does school-based professional development have on the way teachers think about teaching, including their own teaching; on their acquisition and thinking about Jewish content and Judaism; and on how they actually teach?
2. In what ways, if any, does on-going school-based professional development affect the relationships among teachers and between teachers and the principal?
3. What other outcomes of the professional development experiences do teachers report?
4. What conditions seem to support the reported outcomes?

## CASES

### *Brenda and Temple Shalom*

Temple Shalom is a Reform congregation in a mid-size, eastern city. There are about 380 students in the religious school. Brenda has

been the educational director for 18 years. Children in primary grades (K–3) attend 2 hours/week; children in grades four through seven attend a total of about 3.5 hours per week. The synagogue school is fairly typical of congregations in mid-size cities.

### *Professional Development*

In the 2004–05 academic year, the school had 12 teachers. Their experience ranged from one/two years to over twenty. Teachers' contracts stipulated that they attend a yearly "Professional Growth" day and "mini-course" session offered by the local Jewish community federation. In addition, Brenda held monthly staff meetings which were a combination of administration and school-wide educational planning.

Half-way through her tenure in the school (and coincident with her participation in MTEI), Brenda organized her faculty into a monthly evening study group (seminar) that met in addition to staff meetings and other required professional development workshops. Though participation in the seminar was voluntary,<sup>4</sup> it continued for nine years with virtually all teachers attending each year. A core group of six veteran teachers participated in all nine years.

In terms of content, Brenda's monthly seminar, the focus of this case study, moved from being closely related to school curricular issues for the first three years to addressing the "big ideas" in Judaism along theological, moral, and developmental lines. Brenda viewed successful seminars as those that included studying text, gaining personal meaning, and thinking about how the learning applied to teaching children. Each meeting of the seminar followed a common four-part pattern. First, Brenda posed a compelling question to which participants responded in their journals.<sup>5</sup> Those who wished shared their responses with the group. Brenda then introduced a "big idea" (at the observed seminar, the concept was good and evil) to be investigated either through the study of classical Jewish texts and/or texts from general education. Often, she provided written guided questions to facilitate hevruta (dyads) or small group interaction around the text. After these discussions, the whole group discussed their questions, ideas, and thoughts. Finally, Brenda asked her teachers what they might take away from the discussion that applied to their own

---

<sup>4</sup>Teachers received a modest stipend from federation for attending the seminar. No teacher mentioned the stipend as a motivation to attend.

<sup>5</sup>During our site observation the question was: "Imagine your students are now tenth graders—what do you hope they'll remember from their learning here?"

teaching or their school community. (“If we took this text as true what would it tell us as teachers?”)

*Goals for Professional Development.* For Brenda the primary goals of the seminar were to facilitate teachers’ Jewish personal growth and development, to encourage them to think about their teaching in a more holistic way and to develop teacher collegiality by exploring Judaism together. For her, Jewish teaching and learning “should be about making meaning of your life . . . it’s not so much about learning details of customs and the rituals as what the underlying values are . . .”

She described the choice of seminar topics each year as “ones that could apply to everybody and every grade level and every topic . . .” Brenda sought to affect “how teachers viewed or valued Judaism, not necessarily ‘okay—so now go back to class and do this with your kids.’” She said:

For me, a lot of it is making the connection between Judaism and this kind of ancient learning and modern-day experience . . . for teachers to kind of see . . . that these texts apply to real life . . . most of the years it’s been more thinking about themselves and their own ideas and how they relate to all of this stuff with the hope that it kind of trickles down towards ‘oh, this really excites me about Judaism or this makes me think about how I should act toward the kids or to others’ and therefore it affects their teaching.

*Impact on Teachers.* Three core areas of impact emerged from interviews with the teachers at Temple Shalom:

- a consciousness of improved teaching practice/pedagogy and increased pedagogic content knowledge;
- a heightened sense and experience of teacher collegiality; and
- a growth in personal Jewish knowledge.

### ***The Practice of Teaching***

The first area of impact was broadly situated in the practice of teaching. In this area two distinct yet related outcomes of the seminar were observed—one in the area of pedagogy—the “how” of teaching; the other in the area of content knowledge—the “what.”

*Pedagogy.* Self-report of changes in teachers’ pedagogy or approach to teaching, were ubiquitous throughout the interviews. For

some the act of being a learner led to these changes. In these cases, the pedagogical approach of the seminar—the use of journals, the combination of reflective questions, discussion, and text study—became a model that teachers sought to replicate in and/or adapt to their own classrooms. In this regard, one teacher commented, “It [the seminar] put me back in a classroom, in a sense for myself, so . . . I realized how I like to learn, so I try and do it with my kids that way” (Andrea). Another teacher said,

I think I’ve developed a style of teaching, which was different from what I always had . . . what I actually try to do is have discussions very much like what we do in the seminars. Fifth grade is perfect for it because our curriculum is based on sacred texts and all of our [teacher] seminars involved reading text and discussing it . . . and so I’ve carried that over into my fifth grade classes (Barry).

Similarly, the post-Bar Mitzvah class teacher told us that the seminar “was a different way to learn,” one which had a direct application to her classroom.

To piece apart the text and really analyze it and to try and find these other meanings and to discuss it with other people because I’ll have one idea and they’ll have another, and it’s better than just opening up and reading somebody’s interpretation of something because it becomes our own. . . . I had never done that before. . . . [As a result] I use a lot more text in my class, especially with the 8th and 9th graders . . . (Pearl).

Several teachers related how the facilitative, discussion-oriented, and non-frontal teaching style of the seminar led them to think about how they like to learn and, in turn, to bring that style more prominently into their classrooms. In one class, the teacher walked around the room, among the rows of desks (still, there were rows of desks), generating dialogue around a particular theme expressed in a prayer and making connections to things in students’ present-day life experience. This same teacher reported in his interview that, through his participation in the seminar, he had come to think of the teaching/learning paradigm in a new way. A veteran of public as well as congregational schools, he reported bringing this dialogic, interactive, discussion and discovery oriented approach into the public high school classroom setting as well—with great success (to his own surprise).

In addition to transferring the pedagogical approaches modeled in the seminar to their classroom, teachers also reported benefiting from the conversations about pedagogy that took place in the more

interstitial and casual spaces of the seminar experience. One new teacher, recounting a seminar art activity of painting silk *tallitot* (prayer shawls), told how she casually mentioned that one of her students always finishes art projects “ten times faster than anyone else” and she was puzzled as to how to manage the challenge of kids finishing individual project work at different times. She continued, “And we talked about that, and other people gave ideas. So, you know those little pearls of wisdom and possibly how to teach specific things. . . . Those kinds of things that we didn’t specifically address in seminar but yet . . . I started to think about it and how to incorporate it” as a result of these kinds of casual conversations (Elizabeth). Further she reported how she made different teaching decisions than she would have made otherwise.

From incorporating discussion, journaling, text study, alternate modes of hands-on crafts-based approaches, teachers across the board reported that their pedagogical practices were deeply influenced by their experiences as learners in the seminar and from watching Brenda model different modes of teaching. As one teacher succinctly offered, “After I have seminar and then I go back to the class, I realize we need to share and work together and not just, ‘this is what we are going to talk about today’” (Rachel).

*Content Knowledge.* Although the vast majority of the teaching staff at Temple Shalom are veterans in terms of tenure in the classroom, their Jewish content knowledge is somewhat limited. This is no surprise as Gamoran et al. (1998) found only 12% of teachers in congregational settings have college degrees in Jewish studies. At least half of the teachers in this study cited a growth in their knowledge of core Jewish content (holidays, history, text, values, etc.) as a result of the seminar. They linked this growth in content knowledge directly to their enhanced capacity in the classroom. For example, one veteran teacher said:

We did a whole thing on learning Torah so that when it came to the end of the year and we were doing activities with the kids, I had so much more knowledge to be able to just give to them about it rather than ‘this is the assignment’. . . often I would go into the classroom and use the [seminar] material as background information (Andrea).

While another commented,

. . . my knowledge of text has grown so much, and not just knowledge of the text but knowledge of Jewish ideas that I was ignorant of before. I had never

taken Talmud classes, and at a lot of our seminars we really go into that in a lot of depth, so that's helped me [in my teaching] (Barry).

A newer teacher commented that if she were to teach again next year, she “would take an enormous amount of ideas and learning from the seminars” (Elizabeth). And finally,

It [the seminar] always challenges me to think. It always sparks me to keep thinking and growing . . . I am always trying to add something new [to the classroom] that I've just learned . . . the way it [the seminar] challenges me to . . . take even just a small sentence and find all these meanings with it, so we can take . . . maybe the same story that I used the year before and we can read it in a different way (Pearl).

### *Teacher Collegiality*

The interview data pointed to a heightened sense and experience of professional collegiality among teachers. The data had two components: (a) teachers getting to know each other and (b) teachers coming to respect each other as teachers and as people.

*Getting to Know Each Other.* This first aspect of teacher collegiality is defined by a sense of comfort and camaraderie that comes from getting to know each other's ways of thinking, beliefs, practices and personal feelings about Judaism, and so on through the discussion-based seminar. All of the teachers highlighted this as a central outcome of the seminar, and one whose importance should not be underestimated. In the part-time, differentiated schedule of the congregational school, teachers do not have the opportunity to get to know each other on the most basic level—let alone how each thinks and feels, as well as how one practices and what one believes about the very topic they are teaching (Judaism, in its broadest sense). Teachers expressed this idea in a variety of ways:

When you're in a part-time situation, I would not even see the Sunday morning teachers who teach the K-3. I would never see them except in a faculty meeting. . . . But you still don't get to know somebody. . . . [In the seminar] we really got to know each other quite well and I think developing as a staff was more important than any of the knowledge that may or may not have gotten through (Andrea).

I get to know the teachers better. I hear things, I hear stories of ‘I had this problem’ or ‘I had that problem. . . . Teaching problems. Yeah, issues in class and personal stories. You get to know them personally a bit more with the seminar. Especially when we share, you know, our ideas of teaching. . . . (Elizabeth).

The not-for-credit nature of the seminar also removed the competition factor that many teachers cited as an inhibitor to collegiality.

*Respecting and Valuing Each Other.* Several of the teachers we interviewed took the notion of collegiality one step further—from getting to know each other to respecting and valuing one another. Because of the seminar’s design—with a heavy emphasis on discussion, sharing, journaling, and dialogue—teachers felt that they got to “see” each other personally as human beings, not just as other teachers or even as professional colleagues in the best sense. As Andrea said, “[the seminar allows] seeing how they feel about things, in a lot of ways, it develops a respect for the people that I wouldn’t necessarily have had or even known that I had because of their conversation.”

In addition to feeling this way about each other, teachers felt valued and respected by Brenda as their voices and views were constructively challenged and engaged in ways that no other school principal had before. In the words of one teacher with whom we spoke, “Brenda . . . made us feel valued, and she made what we were doing feel valued and made us all feel like we were more than just someone who was spewing out what we were told to spew out. . . .” (Pearl).

### ***Personal Jewish Learning, Inspired to Do/Be Jewish***

For several of the teachers, participation in the seminar also served as a compelling venue for personal adult Jewish learning for its own sake as differentiated from the transfer and adaptation of new content knowledge to the classroom as previously described. Many teachers at Temple Shalom who came with limited Jewish educational backgrounds found the text study and the consideration of big Jewish ideas to be very powerful for them—beyond what they applied to their classrooms. In the words of one veteran teacher, “It was a great opportunity for me to learn . . . a lot about Judaism and especially areas that I never studied formally . . . it filled a lot of gaps in my own Jewish education . . . and the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn” (Barry). A younger teacher who has children in the religious school told us that she “would come away from these seminars learning and being inspired . . .” to do more Jewish ritual at home with her family (Lizzy).

### ***Valuing the Work in Professional Development***

Brenda and her teachers see eye to eye with regard to the positive impact of the seminar experience on teacher collegiality and

community as well as creating a climate where teachers think about how they learn, which in turn leads to them thinking about how their students learn. According to Brenda, and consistent with what we heard from all these teachers, “the biggest thing more than anything else is I think it’s built a connection between people.” She went on to say that she thinks the seminar has “made a huge difference in terms of a sense of cohesiveness among people” and that she does not care what they are studying but the fact that they are “sharing personally with each other . . . about Judaism in their lives” is what is most important to her. As well, all of the teachers in Brenda’s school talked with great enthusiasm about the excellence and enjoyment of this type of professional development versus what they described as more typical “listen to the expert” and “passive” modes of teacher professional development.

### *Lucy and Temple Beth Am*

Temple Beth Am is a Conservative Synagogue in a medium-sized New England city. Its school has about 125 students, K through 7 and about 30 students in the high school program. Primary grades (K–2) attend 2.5 hours/week and elementary grades attend 5 hours/week. Lucy has been the principal for 15 years.

*Professional Development.* During the 2004–05 academic year, there were ten educators in the school who had from three/four years experience to over twenty. Teachers were contractually obligated to attend about 6–8 hours of professional development with no additional compensation. In 2003–04, Lucy made a major shift in both the focus and mode of teacher professional development.<sup>6</sup> She established professional development meetings every other month for 2½–3 hours and initiated the study of the MTEI videotapes.<sup>7</sup> Her strategy, as she

---

<sup>6</sup>Previously, professional development opportunities were of the one-shot workshop model. Frequently, they opened with a short study session led by the rabbi; they then focused on technical issues related to improving teaching strategies. The sessions were not connected to each other.

<sup>7</sup>The MTEI videotape package (2000): *Reading the Classroom as Text: A Videotape Bank and Resource Guide for Investigations of Teaching and Learning*, is a Project of the Mandel Foundation. It includes tapes and transcripts of lessons in congregational schools, textual and student curriculum materials relevant to each lesson, examples of student work, and suggested activities that professional developers could use in conjunction with these records of practice.

described it: they “worked their way around the triangle,”<sup>8</sup> looking at what the teacher was doing or the curriculum or the student. In 2004–05, teachers continued to study videotapes, but they focused on “teaching for understanding” and how it is supported through certain kinds of questions and other techniques. Lucy introduced this focus because she had discovered in conversations with her teachers and after observing them teach, that they did not seem to sufficiently focus on content.

The seminars followed a pattern. First, the teachers studied a Jewish content issue related to the videotape they would view, sometimes in *hevruta* (pairs) and sometimes as a whole group. They then watched the videotape and discussed their observations and interpretations with a particular focus on teaching for understanding. For example, in May they studied two texts exploring the inner life of prayer. These texts connected to the videotape of Judy, who facilitates a discussion with 5 and 6 year olds about praying.

Lucy used a “teaching for understanding” rubric displayed on a flip chart, still hanging from their previous session, and asked teachers to employ its categories as they examined the videotaped lesson. The categories encompass what students are doing to make meaning (e.g., distinguishing big ideas from details) and what the teacher is doing to help them make meaning (e.g., seeking and valuing students’ points of view).

Serious and probing exchanges occurred during the seminars and teachers were able to have disagreements. When the teachers discussed the video of Judy, for example, there was an interesting disagreement about the appropriateness of asking young children to be “analytic” about prayers and praying. One teacher felt it was wrong to have such young children reflect on issues such as prayer—“it is much better to let them experience the wonder of life and not to be reflective” (Rivka). Carla, a teacher of young children disagreed—“So it’s not so much putting ideas toward them, she’s asking them, she’s letting them reflect on their level.”

*Goals for Professional Development.* Lucy was primarily interested in establishing an environment in which teachers would develop new ways of thinking about teaching and learning and begin to reflect on and investigate their own practice. She also stressed the

---

<sup>8</sup>Lucy is referring to the instructional triangle, a graphic that depicts the act of teaching by placing each of three elements (the teacher, the student, and the content) at one point on the triangle. See McDonald (1992).

importance of teachers learning together and developing a common language about teaching and the capacity to share ideas and opinions with one another. Lucy said,

My goal . . . has been to help the teachers become more aware of what happens in the teaching process. I want them to develop a language so they can talk about their teaching with me and with each other. I wanted to establish a collective collegial forum for learning about teaching; to provide the teachers with the opportunity to share their ideas with each other and to learn from each other. Specifically, I want the teachers to be able to identify the strategies they can utilize to get their kids to think more deeply and to work toward real understandings of the content. I hope that by seeing teachers teach through video they will be able to create an image in their own mind of what this looks like and then apply it in their own classrooms.

*Impact on Teachers.* The impact of the professional development seminars was evident in the interviews with each of the teachers, even though the seminars were only in their second year. Teachers described three types of impact: the acquisition of specific concepts about pedagogy and teaching for understanding; becoming more reflective about their own teaching and adopting some changes in their classrooms; and the development of collegiality based on sharing ideas and learning together.

### ***The Practice of Teaching***

The teachers discussed learning about a number of aspects of teaching for understanding and pedagogy more generally, which included thinking about the role of questions in student-teacher interactions; framing big ideas as lesson goals; and analyzing the connections between teaching events and student learning.

With regard to the role of asking and answering questions, interviewees explained that part of what they learned was how to “look closely at questions and how we phrase and how we use them” (Lisa) and “Not to be afraid of kid’s questions. I learned it’s OK not to know the answer” (Sarina).

Throughout the professional development sessions a key concept was distinguishing central, “big” ideas from facts and details. A number of teachers found this idea powerful, especially in framing their own instructional plans. Mimi said, “If you can find the big ideas, it makes it [lesson] more organized. If you take big ideas, you can think the whole lesson through.” And Lisa talked about the importance of “trying to

have a big idea when I am teaching.” When asked for an example of a big idea:

Lisa: We did the story of Ruth today.

Interviewer: What was the big idea?

Lisa: I wanted them to understand that some people choose Judaism. And it was kind of nice because I didn’t realize there were a couple children in class whose parents had converted.

*Becoming Reflective about Teaching.* Lucy wanted her teachers to develop a framework for thinking about teaching that could enhance student learning. She wanted them to be able to step back and look critically at teaching—in the videos and in their own teaching. In fact, a number of teachers described becoming reflective about their own practice. For example, Lisa said: “critically looking at myself. Okay these were my goals, did I get there? If I didn’t get there, where did we go? How can I start this again next week?”

Marilyn noted:

I actually can remember walking out of a Sunday morning thinking, like replaying the two hours in my head and saying, I should have talked to this kid this way. I should have answered this kid this way, like going over it and analyzing what I had done and realizing that I didn’t handle the classroom dynamic the right way in certain situations. So . . . when we discuss these and watch these tapes, I can play in my head how it would have been better to run the classroom. . . . I think that is probably what you learn when you go to school to be a teacher.

Teachers expressed a direct link between analyzing videos of teaching and reflecting on their own teaching. For example, Carla reported:

It (discussing video) helps with analyzing your own (teaching) style and trying to improve upon your own style by looking at how somebody else might approach it. . . . I can look at that and then look at my own teaching style and transfer what I have said about his teaching to myself.

More generally, Stewart indicated the seminar “made me more open to ideas . . . open to flexibility, projects. . . .”

### ***Collegiality***

*Learning with Others.* In the realm of collegiality, the teachers were very positive about the seminars. They told us that in contrast

to previous professional development, the seminars really gave them an opportunity for discussion about teaching and learning. The seminars also provided the first opportunity for them to interact as a whole faculty in an on-going way, even though they might have known one another socially as members of the congregation. They seemed to value particularly the opportunity to have meaningful professional exchanges.

Rivka echoed the sentiments of others:

But when we have a chance to meet professionally like this, this is a whole different story. It is so wonderful to be able to share ideas and share thoughts and share methods with colleagues in this way that wasn't really afforded to us before when it was like meeting style or you know, somebody else coming here.

Lisa said:

We felt more like colleagues. All the times we've gotten together and discuss things in a respectful way, and being accepted and challenged and still respected. I love that we can then step back . . . it's made us more part of a community, enhanced our sense of a school community.

Going further into the significance of collegial conversation and respect, Mimi emphasized the development of a common vision:

I think it put teachers on the same wave length. . . . Where are we as a group of teachers. My kids are going on to other teachers. We are all teaching the same kids. If we have different ideas, having a team philosophy. We do it differently, but have the same goal.

For a number of teachers the seminar represented an opportunity to situate themselves in a broader professional world, even though they are part-time teachers. Rivka felt she became part of a larger enterprise devoted to Jewish learning:

I feel that I'm a part of something bigger than myself. It's much better than just, oh, I'm doing my thing. I feel I can relate on that [higher intellectual] level to a whole circle and I think it's very important. . . . The other teachers, the principal . . . it's a whole world of Jewish learning, and you know the children respond. They know. It does trickle down.

### ***Valuing the Work in Professional Development***

At Beth Am, the teachers were highly positive about the opportunity to engage in sustained learning about teaching. They also seemed to value strongly coming together with all the other teachers on the faculty to engage in serious learning. The seminars afforded opportunities for teachers to contribute to one another's thinking and teaching and to experience inquiry with one another. The teachers expressed their positive attitudes in a number of ways, including comparing professional development in prior years and other venues to the present seminars. The seminars are considered a big advance over staff meetings held in the past. The seminars provided opportunities to build on successive work on the same issues, building knowledge over time which resulted in a different kind of learning than teachers experienced previously. As Mark said, "Something like this which is more like a seminar of duration is more meaningful because there can be follow-up and feedback."

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Similarities and Differences***

These programs have much in common, both in structure and in their effects on participants. Both occupied between 14–18 hours a year, were run by the school's educational leader, and were sustained over multiple years. School faculty came together for serious, on-going learning around topics important to both teaching and the conduct of one's Jewish life. An important feature of the learning associated with the seminars was its cumulative nature. Each session built on previous ones and the consistent attendance of the faculty supported cumulative learning.

Jewish content was an important ingredient in the seminars and an area in which many congregational teachers are not well grounded. In both, teachers studied Jewish texts and other related materials (e.g., research on moral development) using hevruta (pairs) or group discussion. One difference at Temple Shalom was that teachers talked about acquiring Jewish content knowledge as well as pedagogical skills. While text study was a part of the seminars at Beth Am, teachers did not describe acquiring Jewish content knowledge as an outcome to any great extent, perhaps because the central focus of their learning was on pedagogical issues.

Brenda and Lucy clearly established critical and collaborative norms of discourse and an inquiring stance toward Jewish learning and pedagogic approaches. In both these settings, teachers listened to each other with respect, raised important issues for discussion, and were able to disagree with one another. In addition, in the course of discussions both the principal and members of the group are asked to explain what they mean and alternative opinions are solicited. The serious professional conversation fostered in the seminars was highly valued by teachers and in interviews, many mentioned how rare these norms were in their professional lives. Although teachers co-planning lessons or visiting each others classrooms (practices that researchers suggest represent strong elements of professional learning communities) was not observed, norms of discourse *inside* the seminars and a sense of shared enterprise and collaborative building of new professional and personal knowledge were noted. This set of elements of school culture are in keeping with features described in teacher groups when trust and respect have been developed among teachers who are learning together (Grossman et al. 2001; Hord 2004).

The formal professional development program—the seminars—as well as the informal interactions that occurred alongside the formal study together created a new culture of collaboration and collegiality. Teachers in both settings described this enhanced collegiality in glowing terms. Even though the programs had different goals and foci, teachers in both settings developed respect and regard for one another, more sense of what they shared, more interest in their own pedagogic decisions and instructional moves, and more knowledge—be it Jewish content knowledge or pedagogic knowledge. Teachers learned about one another’s teaching, thinking, beliefs, and practices in the seminars. They also developed a sense of a shared enterprise—a feeling of school community. Although they did not talk much about professional matters outside the seminar, they felt less isolated from one another. In contrast, regular meetings around administrative matters did not seem to have the effect of reducing isolation and building a shared sense of purpose. Clearly, coming together regularly as a faculty is not sufficient for building collegiality—on-going learning and “critical” norms of discourse must be in place as well.

Despite differences in how teachers described their feelings of connectedness and collegiality at the two schools, it was clear that the nature of these new relationships meant a lot to them. At Beth Am, teachers talked about getting to know their colleagues as thinkers and learners in a collective professional enterprise aimed at learning about

teaching. At Temple Shalom, teachers talked about getting to know their colleagues in more personal ways, especially with regard to their personal beliefs about and their practice of Judaism.

The one dimension on which there was the most difference reported was in the area of teaching practice. Teachers at Temple Shalom reported changes in instructional approaches that reflected techniques used by Brenda in leading the seminar (e.g., text study, discussion). At Beth Am, there was little evidence of direct change in classroom practice but teachers reported becoming more reflective about their practice and developing new concepts (e.g., focus on big ideas) to apply to their work. The duration of the seminars (9 versus 2 years) and the central focus of each may account for these different outcomes.

### ***Conditions that Promote Change***

In analyzing the data, there seem to be three important contextual and instructional conditions that may account for the ways in which the seminars affected these teachers.

*The Seminars were Site-Based.* The seminars were school-based, which allowed almost all teachers in each school to participate. This opportunity to learn together with all the teachers in their school was highly valued in both settings. While Brenda's teachers received a very modest stipend for their voluntary attendance and Lucy's teachers were contractually obligated to attend, a high level of enthusiasm was evident in both schools. The expectations in both schools seemed reasonable to these part-time teachers. No homework or reading in preparation for the seminar was expected. The continuing attendance over 9 years at Temple Shalom reflects how valuable the teachers believed the seminar to be.

*The Principal was Central.* In both cases, the leader of the seminar was an *insider*, the principal, creating more possibilities for connecting material and conversation to the teachers, as well as selecting material of most relevance to their faculty. In both cases, these educational leaders were strongly committed to professional learning for their teachers and themselves. The seminars were extremely well prepared, reflecting the importance attributed to them by Brenda and Lucy.

Although the part-time schedule followed by teachers in both settings precludes much in the way of follow-up conversation among

teachers with respect to ideas examined in the seminars, each of the principals has further contacts with the teachers—either individually or in small groups—and uses these opportunities to extend and solidify teacher learning beyond the seminar hours. Sometimes, such conversations occur in close proximity to the seminar itself; at other times, these opportunities extend into discussions around curricular issues, a classroom observation, or other formal and informal occasions when the principal and teachers meet.

*The Learning was Cumulative, Dynamic, and Professionally and Personally Relevant.* In contrast to most of the professional development experiences teachers attended previously, the seminars consisted of sustained learning over time so that a cumulative enterprise was situated in the school. Teachers claimed that the actual topics covered were personally or professionally relevant. Learning became collective and public, which strengthened a sense of collegiality and common purpose. With common experiences, effective teacher communication as well as talk with the principal was facilitated. Beyond collegiality, such cumulative knowledge represents valuable adult learning of actual content, some of which can be used in teachers' classes.

Teachers from both schools contrasted the professional development seminars with others they had attended elsewhere in which the main activity was passive listening. The use of active learning, hevruta for text study, and discussion created learning environments that held teachers' interest. Another important ingredient was the establishment of an environment in which teachers took the first steps toward becoming "critical colleagues" (Lord 1994).

### ***Implications***

Part-time teachers in congregational schools will participate enthusiastically in challenging, sustained, and long-term professional development activities based at their schools.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the teachers in these two schools seemed hungry for intellectual and personally relevant learning opportunities that could contribute to their professional

---

<sup>9</sup>A recent study of the NESS (Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools) project in Philadelphia, a three-year professional development program focusing on literacy strategies, found that although teachers were initially resistant and "expressed strong concern regarding the overall time commitment" to a 30 hours a year program, in the long run they valued their learning and actually changed their teaching practices.

lives. Results of such interventions can include a breakdown in teacher isolation, the development of significant collegial relationships, and new norms of discourse among all faculty members. A more open, respectful culture among the teachers seems to grow from the serious learning and discussion in their seminars. In turn, a shared sense of collective responsibility for the school and its students emerges along with a shared mission that permeates the school itself. High quality leadership in the learning setting, such as provided by both Brenda and Lucy, seems essential for this type of success.

The assumption that scheduling and resource barriers would severely limit the extent of change that can occur in the professional culture of congregational schools is faulty. This study suggests that it is both appropriate and imperative that expectations be raised with regard to the professional life of the congregational teachers. The two cases described here suggest much is to be gained in teacher and school quality and student instruction through deliberate efforts to enhance teacher learning and development.

The model of school-based high quality professional development reflected in the work of these two principals has application beyond congregational school settings. There is every reason to think that teachers in full-time settings such as Jewish day schools and other parochial schools would also benefit from this approach. The general education literature supports the notion that high quality, school-based professional development coupled with leadership directed toward improving student learning and supporting teacher growth will improve the overall quality of schools.

---

Susan Stodolsky is Professor Emerita of Education, Comparative Human Development and the College at the University of Chicago where she serves as faculty director of the Urban Teacher Education Program.

Gail Z. Dorph is director of the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute. She also serves as associate editor for the *Journal of Jewish Education*.

Wendy Rosov is director of the Berman Center for Research and Evaluation at the Jewish Education Service of North America. E-mail: s-stodolsky@uchicago.edu

## REFERENCES

- Bryk, A., and B. Schneider. 2002. *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Darling-Hammond, L., and J. Baratz-Snowden, eds. 2005. *A good teacher in every classroom: Preparing the highly qualified teachers our children deserve*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Gamaron, A. et al. 1998. *The teachers report: A portrait of teachers in Jewish schools*. New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education.
- Grossman, P., S. Wineburg, and S. Woolworth. 2001. Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6):942–1012.
- Hord, S. ed. 2004. *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Little, J. W. 1987. Teachers as colleagues. Pp. 491–518 in *Educators' handbook: A research perspective*, edited by V. Richardson-Koehler. New York: Longman.
- Lord, B. 1994. Teachers' professional climate and professional development: Critical collegue-ship and the role of professional communities. The future of education: Perspectives on national standards in America. College Entrance Examination Board, 175–204.
- McDonald, J. P. 1992. *Teaching: Making sense of an uncertain craft*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. 1996. *What matters most: Teaching for America's future*. New York.
- Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools. 2006. *Evaluation report*. New York: JESNA.
- Stodolsky, S. S., G. Z. Dorph, and S. Feiman-Nemser. 2002. Growing as teacher educators: Learning new professional development practices. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 68(1):58–72.
- Stodolsky, S. S., G. Z. Dorph, and S. Feiman-Nemser. 2006. Professional culture and professional development in Jewish schools: Teachers' perceptions and experiences. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 72(2):91–108.