

PaJeS Governors' Evening: Monday 19th May 2014

Workshop 1: What are Jewish Schools for?

An international perspective on the purposes and aims of Jewish schooling

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Alex opened the session with some questions:

- Why do we, as governors, invest our time in Jewish schools?
- What's it all for?
- How do our values inform the nature of our involvement in our schools?

The participants looked at a text entitled 'Common Elements in American Jewish Education' (see attached). This essay, written in 1944, was an attempt to articulate a common curriculum for Jewish schools whatever their denomination. The authors, led by Alex Dushkin of the New York Jewish Education Committee were looking to generate a conception of Jewish education that would apply to all schools from the secular Bund to the strictly orthodox Chedarim.

The article dismisses the idea of the '*lowest common denominator*' and instead states that '*what is needed is a formulation of common elements that will enable each Jewish group to teach all that it wishes to teach its children, its full curriculum whilst yet enabling others to do likewise.*'

The elements selected by the article are:

1. The classical continuing Jewish tradition - religious, literary, institutional and ethical...Torah in its widest sense
2. Concrete ways of personal Jewish living – Mitzvot, customs, folkways, language forms, obligations
3. Hebrew in Jewish literature and life
4. The Jewish people -identification with it, knowledge of its past and present, and desire for its survival and welfare the world over
5. Palestine (pre-state Israel) – its unique role in Jewish history and tradition and its continued up building and development
6. The American Jewish Environment – the history and development of American Jewry, participation in and responsibility for its welfare and growth, the status of Jews as Americans and the relation of the Jewish tradition to American democracy
7. Faith in the divine purpose making for the betterment of the world and man, invoking the human obligation to strive toward a better, democratic world order

Alex asked the group whether, in the context of their own schools, they thought any of the elements could be crossed off the list.

The responses showed a diverse range of priorities. Some themes emerged.

Hebrew

- One participant suggested that Hebrew literature and life was too academic
- Others believed that teaching of Hebrew is critical

- Some participants thought that parents are more open to Hebrew being taught as a Modern Foreign Language than a 'Jewish' subject. They did not think the study of Biblical Hebrew was relevant.

The UK Jewish Environment

- There was a difference in opinion about the importance of teaching the history and diversity of the UK Jewish community.
- Some felt that it was too narrow a subject and might lead to isolation and exclusivity
- Others thought that it was very important for children to understand who they are through their Jewish cultural heritage.

Alex asked the group which of the elements they would choose if they could only choose one.

Answers included:

- Concrete ways of Jewish living (no. 2) - this was the most popular response
- The Jewish people (no. 4)
- The continuing Jewish tradition (no. 1)

Participants were unable to reach consensus on the most important element. Alex noted that a common critique of Jewish schools is that they are indistinguishable from each other. However, the session showed that there was a wide range of values amongst governors. Their schools seemed to be geared towards different priorities

What other elements might be on the list that were not originally included?

Suggestions included:

- Learning about other faiths
- Ecology and environment
- Ethics – how to be a better person.

Alex pointed out a problem with the 1944 proposal is that it focuses on the cognitive: on what children should know. In the intervening years, Jewish schools, like all schools have been asked to take responsibility for nurturing behavioural, emotional and spiritual outcomes in students. They have had to take over responsibilities previously fulfilled by families and communities. Today the choices are perhaps even harder than they once were.

How could governors take these discussions further with their governing bodies?

Alex suggested that governing bodies could ask themselves the questions

- What do we want children to get out of our Jewish school?
- What is fundamental?
- What is the best way to teach it?
- As there are never enough hours in the school day, how do we prioritise?

In order to answer this, Alex suggested an approach he learned from one of his teachers, Professor Michael Rosenak, who argued that all of Jewish education is concerned with 5 commonplaces: these include:

1. **Torah**, broadly defined as contemporary Jewish culture as well as written and oral texts
2. **G-d**
3. **Jewish People**
4. **The Land of Israel**
5. **Messianic Vision** (the idea that Jews are on the earth for a reason i.e. we have a mission)

Given that, today, Jewish education is about more than only concerned with cognitive outcomes, we might consider the following dimensions as foci for learning:

Knowledge	what you know	'the head'
Attitude	what you feel	'the heart'
Behaviour	what you do	'the hand'
Spiritual matters		'the soul'

The dimensions and the ways of learning can be interconnected with one another in a grid as shown below.

	Torah	G-d	Jewish Peoplehood	Land of Israel	Messianic Vision
Knowledge					
Attitude					
Behaviour					
Soul					

This grid could be used by governors for strategic planning, helping them to define their priorities for Jewish education in their school.

In work with schools, Alex has found that this grid can be a useful tool to help make explicit the competing goals that schools seek to achieve, and at the same time compare this with how they currently apportion their time.