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HaYidion

הידיעון

DIFFERENTIATION



PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools

HaYidion

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DIFFERENTIATION

Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.

Margaret Mead

At its heart, differentiation gets to the essential paradox of education as it has been practiced for most of its history. A teacher teaches to a group of students—10, 20, 200 in a class (as in my college's intro psych course). But the true target is the individual student, and the proof of the teaching lies in what each singular student learns and makes of that learning. Statistics are important, evaluations are necessary, but what truly matters is the imprint that learning leaves on a student's mind and heart, and what his or her hands are able to make of it.

It is a cliché that is nonetheless true: Each person is unique, different from all other people. Our uniqueness does not lie (uniquely!) in our genes, as identical twins are not identical people. We are all born with passions and abilities, which can grow, change, mature, be molded. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) famously expounds upon the uniqueness of each individual to convey the religious value of human life: "Therefore everyone must say, 'For my sake was the world created.'" Each person is a cosmos, with all of the mystery, the unknown, the ability to develop in ways never before witnessed. This philosophy has profound implications for education. If no two people are the same, then they don't learn the same way and can't be taught the same way. As the oft-quoted verse in Psalms begins, "Teach the young person according to his path"—that is, according to his or her unique path of learning and growth.

These sentiments are beautiful, but how does an educator implement them in a classroom that contains many students? How is it possible to teach to all students and to each and every student at the same time? For the past generation, this is precisely the quandary that educational thinkers have wrestled with. Under the banner of differentiation, teachers have been encouraged to change their philosophy, their approach, their instructional methods to give students greater control over their learning. Instead of a "sage on the stage," a "guide on the side"; rather than students in rows, modular classroom furniture and stations. And a host of pedagogies for "active learning" so students don't sit bored and overlooked, chewing gum and passing notes: Project-Based Learning, Inquiry Learning, Expeditionary Learning... Alongside of pedagogy has come the ed-tech industry, enabling students to learn by themselves and with others in ways never before possible. These initiatives are all designed to help students discover and develop their own talents, their interests, their voices.

The articles in this issue explore the practice of differentiation both inside and out of the student classroom. **Daniel** begins the issue with a cri-de-coeur on differentiation as the heart of our Jewish educational mission. By contrast, **Eis** issues a warning about the potential pitfalls of differentiated instruction, as largely conceived and practiced. **Barg** introduces the concept and techniques of coaching, borrowed from

professional sports and cultivated in charter schools. **Gamliel** discusses the educational pathway of creative students, and the tensions they may feel with religious instruction. **Heyman and Ruderman** argue for the educational benefits and moral imperative of an inclusive classroom, while **Englander and Micley** explain some of the ways that online instruction can strengthen differentiation in a Judaics classroom. The last two pieces in this section consider the relationships that teachers build with students as critical for this work: **Ross** exploring ways that the Montessori method enables teachers to work one-on-one, and **Levine** proposing the quality of kindness as an enveloping principle that entails numerous implications for educational instruction and classroom culture.

Our spread of pieces from schools presents a wide assortment of strategies and programs that teachers and administrators employ to support and inspire students in their unique learning paths. The next articles look at ways that differentiation challenges teachers and changes the nature of their work. **Novick Salomon and Turetsky** respond to several ways that teachers may object to the premises of differentiation on the grounds of fairness. **Price and Skolnick Einhorn** offer the concept of neurodiversity as a lever for effecting a paradigm shift in teachers' methods of engagement with student challenges. **Exler and Leider** describe their approach to training Judaics teachers in differentiated instruction, and **Liberty** discusses some of the main obstacles that teachers encounter as they transition to personalized instruction. The final articles explore the theme from other angles. **Schiffman** shows ways that schools of different size and orientation may approach their capital campaigns, and **Lindner and Malkus** confront the "mah nishtanah" question: What makes a Jewish day school different?

Finally, we are pleased to introduce some new features that represent new initiatives that my Prizmah colleagues are spearheading. **On Board** showcases reflections by board members throughout the field and parallels the work that Ilisa Cappell and her team are doing with dozens of day schools through Prizmah's Board Fitness program (see page 62). In a guest column, Matt Williams, a rising scholar of Jewish education, approaches the issue theme informed by wisdom culled from scholarly research and personal experience. And a hat tip to Andrea Hernandez, whose **graphic illustration** helps to summarize and enliven the ideas of the last article.

We wish day schools collectively, and all your stakeholders individually, a new year blessed with growth. May the uniqueness of your school shine in the neshamot of your students and cast its light far and wide throughout your community.



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PAUL BERNSTEIN

FROM THE
CEO



NEW SERVICES FOR THE NEW YEAR

With the new school year under way, the team at Prizmah wishes every Jewish day school the greatest success for 2017-18/5778.

In our launch year, we were inspired by the levels of engagement by so many schools in learning and sharing through Prizmah. At the Prizmah Conference, participating in individual programs and services, online through our Reshet (network) groups, and through writings here in *HaYidion* and elsewhere, we have appreciated the commitment each person makes to see their school thrive and support colleagues in other schools. Most of all, connecting through Prizmah, we see teachers, administrators and lay leaders working together to gain from other incredible Jewish educators across North America.

We started this school year with the toughest of challenges for our colleagues, families and students in the wake of Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Irma in Florida. In the immediate aftermath of Harvey, teams from each school in Houston worked tirelessly to provide for students and families, re-opening school as rapidly as possible. Schools across the country immediately responded with offers of help, with fundraising campaigns and lemonade stands, alongside an outpouring of offers to host students needing relocation and send student volunteers. We salute all who work so hard for our students, wish all who suffered loss our very best wishes, and stand by them on the long road to recovery. The Jewish day school community stands stronger together.

This year, Prizmah's team seeks to enhance the ways in which we serve your schools. We are focused on our three goals: enhancing educational excellence, strengthening the financial vitality of our schools, and building support for Jewish day schools.

To deliver on these goals, we seek to grow Prizmah's capability and effectiveness in supporting schools. In pursuit of excellence, we believe that strengthening leadership is central. Prizmah's existing leadership programs, such as the Head of School Professional Excellence Program and YOU Lead, are being enhanced, together with leadership coaching and head of school smart search. We are strengthening the learning opportunities by adding to our calendar Leaders to Leaders, an intensive peer-to-peer problem-solving and learning conference in October.

The success of professional leaders in schools depends crucially on their partnership with lay leadership. To kick off further efforts to strengthen good governance, Prizmah is launching Board Fitness Services, in partnership with BoardSource. (See page 62 for a description.) We are working closely with federations to make this service available to as many schools as possible and we will add further supports as Board Fitness rolls out.

This is just the beginning of our drive to support excellence in school leadership. Prizmah is also laying the groundwork for future initiatives. We are in the process of completing a field study into the development of professional leaders in schools, which will enable Prizmah to focus on ways to ensure that current leaders and the pipeline of future candidates will be stronger in support of a vibrant day school field. This work has been strongly influenced by the involvement of a number of school leaders, and we look forward to inputs from many as we develop new Prizmah services in the future.

Prizmah appreciates the pressing challenges of day school affordability. As we complete current cohorts of training programs for fundraising, governance and admissions, yielding results such as the \$104 million raised by participating schools for endowments, we will design future services to meet your current and emerging needs. We will share results of a Prizmah study into alternative tuition models and, in conversation with you, explore ways to further meet your financial needs.

Our network of teachers and leaders is at the heart of how we serve schools. This year, we are providing opportunities for deeper engagement among peers. Through active engagement in Reshet groups, you can raise questions and solve issues by leveraging the vast experience of colleagues, whether among heads of schools, Judaic studies coordinators or board chairs, along with many other peer groups. You have a banquet of choices for in-person convenings throughout the year, including job-alike conversations and skills-building seminars, as well as gatherings for leaders from schools of specific denominations, through our affinity groups.

Delivery of these services is the result of the intense work of an extraordinary group of Prizmah staff, our board, and partners in schools and others serving the Jewish education field. Team Prizmah has come together over the past year as a unified organization, no longer defined by the pre-merger separate organizations. We are continuing to manage and improve established programs with proven track records, while we collaborate with you to better understand your needs and build new initiatives to bolster your school's success.

Prizmah is your organization. Becoming a member of Prizmah enables you to access all these services. Your membership also helps us to shape our offerings, strengthen what we do and strive for our goal: to serve the field *ba'asher hu sham*, working with and for each school in the ways that they need. Please help us shape a brilliant future for Jewish day schools.

KATHY MANNING

From the
Board



A FEW THINGS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FUNDRAISING

I recently had the privilege of attending a Prizmah convening of development professionals for some of the largest day schools across the country. Hosted by The Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Maryland and ably facilitated by our new COO, Elissa Maier, the convening was a wonderful example of the important role Prizmah can play in bringing schools together to learn from outside experts and share best practices. The high level of discussion, dedication and creativity was impressive. With presentations ranging from how to train and engage lay leaders in cultivating and soliciting donors, to optimal ways to connect with alumni, the discussions were energizing and thoughtful, and they provided practical ideas for raising the funds needed to make our schools excellent and accessible.

Fundraising is something all of our schools must do, and those that are the most successful learn to create strong partnerships between the school professionals, board members and other volunteers. Properly trained and motivated volunteers can be an extremely effective part of our schools' fundraising teams. Some volunteers are great connectors but aren't comfortable making the ask. (On p. 48, Traci Stratford offers excellent advice for working with board members who are ask-averse.) Some volunteers lead by example and bring an air of authenticity and integrity when they are simply present at a solicitation. Others have a compelling story to tell about how the day school has impacted them or their family. And some volunteers have the experience and comfort level to make the ask to the right person in the right way. Each of these volunteers can be extremely helpful in building an effective fundraising effort, especially if paired with a skilled development professional.

The best development professionals I've worked with have provided me with the information, skills and confidence to be an effective part of the fundraising team. Some have taught me by example, others have provided me with step-by-step training, and others have learned with me as we were confronted by unexpected questions and challenging reactions. It's important

for volunteer fundraisers to experience the satisfaction of a successful solicitation, just as it's critical to learn to shake off those solicitations that miss the mark. As my federation director once told me on a community mission to Israel, "If you don't want to throw at least one person off the bus, then you haven't brought enough people on the trip."

Over the years, I've learned a few things about fundraising that may be helpful.

1. People give for a variety of reasons. Find the one that fits your potential donor and you are more likely to be successful. Some people give out of a sense of obligation, some when they are passionate about a project; some give to make a deep impact, some to make a statement to others; some give when they perceive a personal benefit, and some just can't say no to the solicitor. All of these are legitimate reasons for giving.
2. People give to people they know, like, respect and trust, who "put their money where their mouth is," and who make them feel good about themselves and what they are doing. Most important, people give to people who ask. Although that may seem obvious, far too many gifts are left on the table because no formal ask was made.
3. People like to feel part of something bigger than themselves. Donors who give to a day school aren't just helping one child or one program—they are helping to build a strong Jewish future.
4. You can never thank a donor too much. A donor who isn't thanked properly or made to feel good about their participation is unlikely to give again.

The development convening I attended is just one example of how Prizmah can help day schools enhance the way we fundraise and, more important, enhance the way we tell the story of how important excellent day schools are to the future of our Jewish community.

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NOA DANIEL

Differentiation

A Moral and Fundamental Imperative for Jewish Educators

Differentiation is the opposite of standardization. It relies on the teacher to plan lessons and learning experiences with the diverse needs of the learners in mind. Whether it's about modes of delivery, flexible use of time or space, student groupings or materials used, the goal of differentiation is to meet the ever-more varied needs of the students in our care.

Teaching is no longer about imparting knowledge or skills; it's about learning. Through the methodologies of differentiation, all students should have access to learning content and skills regardless of "ability." The aphorism in Proverbs 22:6, "Teach a child according to his own way," implies that learning is personal and requires differentiation. While it can seem overwhelming to conceptualize doing something different for each student, that is not really what differentiation is about. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, a thought leader on differentiation, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. Differentiation is a form of responsive practice that involves seeing, reaching and teaching every student.

Differentiation is not just an idea in education, but a *belief* that everyone can learn given the right conditions and connections. In Solomon Schechter's famous essay "The Dogmas of Judaism," he wrote, "We usually urge that in Judaism religion means life; but we forget that a life without guiding principles and thoughts is a life not worth living." Isn't *learning for all* a guiding principle of a Jewish education? If we hold that idea to be true, then differentiation is a moral and fundamental imperative for Jewish educators.

Because learners bring more to the classroom than their brains, differentiation must go beyond *sechel*, intellect. Children are whole

people with interests and experiences, fears and hopes, skills and abilities. To teach the whole child, we must see the whole child. The Talmud says that the highest form of wisdom is kindness. If we are Jewish educators in name and value, then differentiation is an act of kindness because it involves understanding and caring about who our students are so that we can help them learn. Kindness involves the ingredients of *rachmanut*, *ahavah* and *kavod*.

Differentiation requires a partnership between the teacher and student as the gateway to learning. This exchange, then, requires connection. Differentiation is about knowing *who* is in the room and feeling *rachmanut* for those individuals. Rabbi David Wolpe wrote, "The Hebrew *rachmanut* (meaning mercy and compassion) comes from *rechem*, womb. Compassion is feeling, almost physically, the reality of the other." In the classroom, that is hard to do. We don't know how children feel about themselves, what is going on at home, or what lies behind the external presentation. All people are icebergs; we have to care enough to get to know more than we see on the surface. In order to have *rachmanut*, we have to find ways to see more than the "abilities" of the learner. We must tap into our students by providing different entry points to assignments and creating invitations for students to bring their whole selves to their learning.





We can't reach and teach every child until we really *know* our learners. Besides being personable and developing relationships with each student, implementing an approach that uses personalizing projects to help students learn and develop skills is a powerful way to differentiate. Tasks that reflect children's lives and interests engage them and help them learn. This information can be useful when planning differentiated lessons or assignments, because the teacher has become apprised of more than a laundry list of descriptive adjectives provided by the learners. By seeing our students as whole people, we can better prepare for and respond to their learning needs.

The classroom can also become a supportive learning community where students have a platform and a safety net for risk taking. When students are involved in personalized work that they share with the class, the teacher is not the only one privy to the insights of the individual. Instead, each member of the class gets to know other students in a meaningful way, and the class becomes a supportive learning community. Compassion is easier when students are allowed to see and be *themselves* in their learning. This goes beyond choice and voice. You can't personalize until you see the world through a person's eyes. *Rachmanut* requires empathy, and empathy requires knowing who your students *really* are, including their lives and interests outside of school. *Rachmanut* is a key ingredient in promoting differentiation.

While teaching is both art and science, it also involves *ahavah*. One of the root meanings of *ahavah* is "to give," so the word doesn't just mean the act of love, but to give love. In order for *ahavah* to be given, there must be a receiver. That goes back to the essential exchange between teacher and student in the

learning equation. Teaching is as much a process as learning, and it involves great efforts from both the students and the educators. In order to do this well, with all of its challenges, there has to be some level of *ahavah* for this sacred work and for the learners themselves.

Most people who choose teaching as a profession do so out of *ahavah*. Some teachers love the content that they teach. Some teachers love creating learning opportunities. Other teachers love working with students and seeing them move forward on their learning continuum. The power of synthesizing all of those loves is a contagious experience that leads to deep connections and learning for all. Differentiated learning can be cultivated through a relationship built on *ahavah* because it has the power to reveal the hidden spark inside each student. That makes differentiation an essential individual experience because everyone is made to feel visible and valuable.

Love and respect go hand-in-hand. The word for respect is *kavod*, which comes from the word *kaved*, meaning heavy. Differentiation is not an easy task. Respecting our learners and their work can require a lot of effort, but it's worth it when you see struggling students' light bulbs flash or celebrate student achievement in areas they never imagined.

Rabbi Hillel said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others" (Shabbat 31a). This is about respect, one of the key elements to the Jewish worldview, and should be noticeable in all aspects of a Jewish day school. It is an integral component of almost everything that Judaism teaches, from how one is to approach our relationship with God to how we interact with our parents. The value of respect must extend beyond the individual or family to the community, which includes the school. To live a life respecting others means to

realize that everyone is significant and should be valued for who they are as individuals. Differentiation is an act of *kavod*.

Differentiation is not just an idea in education, but a fundamental guiding principle that everyone can learn. We have a tradition of equating learning and honey. Kindness is also compared to honey, as healthy for the body and sweet to the soul (Proverbs). If we show compassion, love and respect to all of our students, it will help them persevere through difficult challenges because the kindness is encouraging.

If being at Jewish day school is only "Jewish" when the students are learning Torah or holidays or how to speak Hebrew, then we are denying our students their inherent rights and we are doing an injustice to our faith. Differentiation is one of the most Jewish things we can do. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "One of the most stunning gestures of Judaism was to overturn the whole idea of a hierarchy of knowledge, for if there are inequalities of learning, they will be replicated through all other social structures, giving some people unwarranted power over others. This is the great insight of the Jewish vision, from which all else followed: A free society must be an educated society, and a society of equal dignity must be one in which education is universal" (*Radical Then, Radical Now*).

This universal education is dignified only if learning is a universal right and inequalities are minimized. When we treat others with compassion, love and respect, we are embodying Torah. It is through the values of *rachmanut*, *ahavah* and *kavod* that we can understand why differentiation, the key in making education universal, is a guiding principle in Judaism and a moral imperative for all Jewish educators.

Differentiation

Proceed with Caution

It is hard to disagree with the goals of differentiated instruction. Carol Ann Tomlinson, differentiation's most prominent theoretician and proponent, describes differentiation as student-centered learning, with teachers systematically changing the educational content, process or product to adapt to each student's profile, interests and readiness. Given that every student has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses, talents, interests, cultural upbringing and academic history, for any given lesson students will need a change in level or style to accommodate the differences.

Differentiation presents teachers, therefore, with the herculean task of planning horizontally for different types of learners and vertically for various levels of learners. Additionally, some educators have critiqued differentiation for lowering educational standards and making impractical demands on teachers' time and workload. In the following article, some of the theories and practices that are incorporated in differentiation will be examined to see if they really represent effective educational enhancements.

My contention is that differentiation as commonly understood and practiced, and championed by Tomlinson, employs educational and psychological theories that have been largely discredited, and lacks demonstrated educational effectiveness. Differentiation emphasizes inputs, such as student learning profiles and engagement, at the expense of outputs, namely, academic and professional preparedness. This version of differentiation also has the potential to set up our students for future academic and social-emotional failure.

Mistaken Theory

The learning-styles theory of teaching individual students in their dominant mode of thinking plays a key role in determining a student's profile. The theory, however, has shown no learning advantage to students (Harold Pashler et al., "Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence"). Further, the fixed mode of knowledge acquisition can hinder a student's ability to adapt to their future educational and employment situations (Bruce Hood et al., "No Evidence to Back Idea of Learning Styles"). Tomlinson's 2012 response changes learning styles from a guide to tailor a student's curriculum into a target for all students to acquire multiple modalities of learning. Tomlinson's other three factors of a student's learning profile cannot provide sufficient information to develop a learner profile as gender and culture are too generic, while intelligence preference only relates to specific academic disciplines.

A second criterion that Tomlinson employs for a teacher to differentiate is using student interest or choice to harness motivation. Here too the theory has not led to better results, as we are asking students to choose their educational path based on their immature perceptions of knowledge, experiences and aspirations, and without an understanding of the long-term consequences of not learning the correct skills (Kirschner and van Merriënboer, “Do Learners Really Know Best? Urban Legends in Education”). Further, intrinsic motivation may not lead to higher achievement levels (Garon-Carrier et al., “Intrinsic Motivation and Achievement in Mathematics in Elementary School”).

Educational Outputs

Lastly and most importantly, differentiation still has not demonstrated its effectiveness (Capp, “The Effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning”; Ashman, “Where is the Evidence to Support Differentiation?”). Tomlinson has been promoting differentiation since 1995 and even so, in 2012 she could only state, “Early research on differentiation is promising” (Tomlinson and Imbeau, “Common Sticking Points about Differentiation”). The early research that she refers to is anecdotes or small-scale studies. Capp’s three-year meta-analysis of literature, published in 2017, denies demonstrated impact. Tomlinson grounds her claim to the success of differentiation in measures of student readiness: student interest and engagement, student learning profile and classroom management.

In his *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins emphasizes that many organizations confuse inputs and outputs, and mistakenly judge success based on inputs. He brings two examples. An input of police work is closing cases, the output is less crime. For a symphony the output is a great musical performance, ticket sales are an input. The easiest way to define outputs is the lasting impact that we want to see. Inputs are the ingredients that enable creating the output. Assessing success should not be based primarily on inputs, but rather whether the actual outputs match the intended ones.

Since schools are part of larger educational, employment and societal systems, a primary output of educational institutions is academic and social-emotional preparedness for the student’s upcoming stage, whether another type of school or employment. The research that supports the differentiation principles listed above—the student learning profile, student interest and engagement, classroom management—are inputs, and we cannot judge success based on them. Instead we should determine educational effectiveness based on college and professional preparedness. Currently, 40% of twelfth graders are ready for college level reading and only 25% for college level math.

Instead, differentiating could be masking stagnant levels of student learning. While the college readiness rates have not changed much over the past decade, high schools graduation rates have risen to an all-time high of 83%, where anecdotally the replacing of traditional requirements with differentiated products accounts for some of the rise in graduation rates.

This version of differentiation appeals to our sense of fairness by presenting itself as student-centered and responding to the student’s present reality. However, preparing students for future flourishing is more student-centered. Standards and benchmarks, like Common Core, define what a student will need to succeed at their next stage, whether high school, college or employment.

Tomlinson does not believe that differentiation and standards-based education are contradictory: “Curriculum tells us *what* to teach:

Differentiation tells us *how*” (“Reconcilable Differences? Standards-Based Teaching and Differentiation”). Yet she also proposes that a differentiated classroom employ materials with different reading levels. When teacher after teacher, in class after class, year after year, implement this differentiated content, it leads to the student not being on the reading level needed for the next stage. Instead, Tomlinson seems to view educational standards as a guide instead of necessity. (To clarify, I concur with Tomlinson that a student with a diagnosed learning disability should have a modified curriculum.) This approach to standards fits with Tomlinson’s view of school, which is “to maximize the capacity of each student,” not to prepare students for their next stage.

Possible Academic Harm

The mystery of education is that all children are a world unto themselves with their observable gifts and latent talents. Each person develops these talents at different rates and ways. Over the course of a lifetime, some talents will be developed and some won’t. Some students learn slowly and then catch up quickly or blossom later in life. Alternatively, some star students seem to plateau and do not reach the potential that we initially envisioned. Some need to be pushed more, while others have motivation and discipline. Ultimately, only God knows the full potential of a person, while all we can determine is what a student currently comprehends.

In assessing student readiness, differentiation looks at a student’s present reality and then moves them “slightly beyond where they can work without assistance.” Whereas in a standards-based system, the teacher knows the upcoming steps from the mapped out curriculum that leads to college preparedness, differentiation requires the teacher to create a specific curriculum for each student. This locks the student into conceptions of their learning potential, essentially creating a track, and doesn’t give them sufficient opportunities and incentives to rise beyond those conceptions.

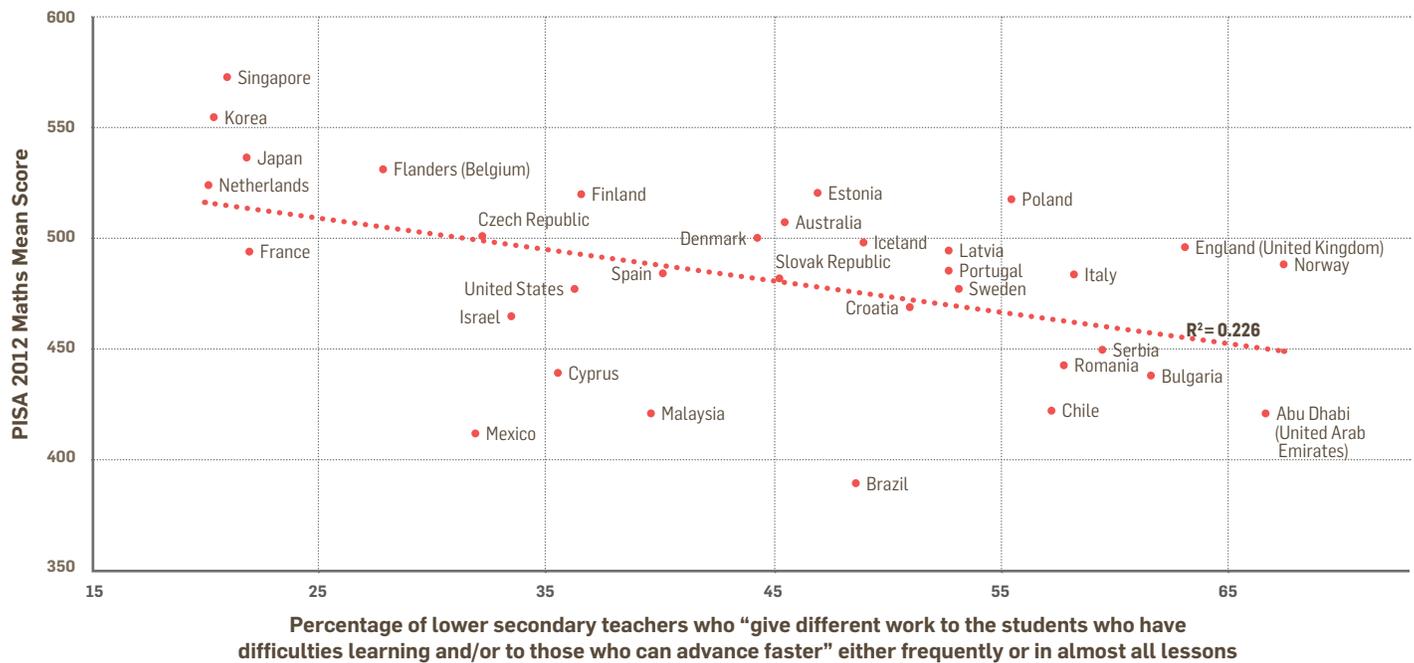
With this in mind, we should note that the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test taken by half a million students in 72 countries and run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), highlights a negative correlation between success in math and differentiation. Countries that differentiate more perform worse (Ashman, “TALIS Data on Differentiation”).

Along these lines, the OECD’s 2015 PISA report remarks that “greater exposure to enquiry-based instruction is negatively associated with science performance” (“Key Findings from PISA 2015 for the United States”), even as the PISA tests application, not recall.

Possible Social-Emotional Harm

Just as the well-intentioned learning styles movement did not produce better learning results and may have caused harm by encouraging students to stay in fixed modes of thinking, so too differentiation can potentially impair by misshaping a student’s thinking about life.

For the first time in 130 years, the likeliest living arrangement for adults age 18–34 is with their parents. In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Senator Ben Sasse, a former university president, decries “our reluctance to expose young people to the demands of real work.” He concludes, “If our children are to become real adults, they need to know that difficult tasks are things to be conquered, not avoided.”



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Differentiation protects our students from the real emotional and intellectual demands of life, by having the teacher shape the reality to meet the students. As many areas in life are not that flexible, differentiation may possibly stunt their maturation. In fact, because today's students will change jobs and careers more often than their parents' generation and will need to deal with the uncertainty caused by disruptive innovations eliminating some careers and creating new ones, our students need to have a wider range of talents and the ability to adapt in bewildering situations. Grit requires inner resolve to handle the unexpected and change.

Individualization

Individualization is an alternative theory that can address the uniqueness of each student and their eventual specialization, while ensuring that all students have basic general knowledge and skills. Individualization, sometimes called individualized learning, is a form of blended learning. This is not to be confused with Personalized Learning, which has similar aims to Tomlinson's differentiated instruction (Dale Basye, "Personalized vs. Differentiated vs. Individualized Learning").



To Learn More

Greg Ashman's blog: gregashman.wordpress.com

Dale Basye, "Personalized vs. Differentiated vs. Individualized Learning," ISTE

Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer*

James R. Delisle, "Differentiation Doesn't Work," *Education Week*

Salman Kahn, *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined*

Mike Schmoker, "When Pedagogic Fads Trump Priorities," *Education Week*

While differentiation focuses on "how" a student learns by creating a student profile from learning styles, background information and assessment of potential, individualization focuses on "when," building a student profile based on the performance and achievement of standards. The basic theory is mastery learning, where students move to the next level once demonstrating mastery of the present one. Graduation means mastery over the minimum set of standards in each subject needed for the next stage of life. Students display their individuality by specializing in different areas: one student masters more learning in math, while another emphasizes history. Academic records will list the benchmarks and standards that the student has mastered.

During school time, students receive teacher guidance and instruction; a teacher makes judicious use of the inputs, like group work. Teachers direct student time allocation toward continued specialization or shoring up the weaker areas of their general knowledge. As standards and benchmarks are not always linear, especially in the humanities, teachers will also direct students who repeatedly do not attain mastery as to when it is time to move on and try a new, parallel topic. The student could return to the standard at a later date with additional development.

To accomplish individualization, teachers need the assistance of standards-based digital assessments. These assessments give students the independence to try numerous times and can automate results for teacher and student. Their digital memory can track a student's progress better than a teacher. Teachers now have additional time and more data to enable higher-quality individualized interactions. These resources allow a teacher to loosen the previously needed group (class/grade) bonds. As students work at different paces, they will not be held back by their group, nor can they hold them up either. In his *One World Schoolhouse*, Salman Kahn presents a similar educational vision.

Individualization aims for the best of both worlds. It starts with standards and an output-oriented education, while validating the uniqueness of each student. It is efficient and flexible. Paired with skills and mental fortitude gained through strong performance expectations, our students will be fortified to flourish in the future.



Learning from Sports Coaches and Charter Schools

From Differentiated Instruction to
Differentiated Conversation

TOBY **BARG**



Coaching is about teaching, and the more effectively you can teach, the more complexity players can handle. As technology has gotten better so has the teaching, which has had a direct effect on the quality and complexity of the strategy we see on the field. Chris B. Brown

Arizona Diamondbacks third baseman Jake Lamb was having an unimpressive season on a mediocre team when he overheard the sports commentators on TV discussing a MLB hitter who had demonstrated the most improvement in a specific skill and, to his surprise, it was himself. The stat that they were referring to was exit velocity or speed at which the ball comes off a bat, which—along with stats like launch angle and spin rate—are revolutionizing the sport of baseball. For Lamb, a player who had shown no interest in stats and was reluctant to, in his own words, “clutter his head with information,” the stats provided him with something he hadn’t expected. You see, he had been working on a new swing for weeks and was not necessarily seeing a jump in his performance level on the field, but this information was confirming for him that he was indeed on the right track in his training and that would have a valuable impact on his mindset.

Benji K. was what we would call a struggling reader. Benji had spent years being pulled out of class by well-meaning interventionists only to stumble during his time in class on content-area assignments that were too long and arduous for him to master. No words of encouragement or pats on the back would change the fact that Benji had decided he was never going to be a reader and that it didn’t pay to try at all. Then, in seventh grade, Benji’s school implemented an online adaptive ELA program that would allow the teacher to assign the same content to all her students but at 12 different reading levels. This would have helped Benji plug into what his class was doing, but, again, Benji didn’t think it paid to try.

Writing About Sports Coaches

Chris B. Brown, “Football Strategy’s Radical Tech-Fueled Revolution Has Begun,” *Wired*

Albert Chen, “The Metrics System: How MLB’s Statcast Is Creating Baseball’s New Arms Race,” *Sports Illustrated*

Doug Lemov, “Coaching to Develop Players Vs. Coaching to Win,” *Teach Like a Champion* blog

Dr. Lee Hancock, “How To Develop Problem-Solving Athletes,” *Dr. Lee Hancock* blog

Hugh Delehanty, “The Game Changer: How Seattle Seahawks Coach Pete Carroll Is Reshaping NFL Culture,” *Mindful*

Knowing this about Benji, his teacher planned carefully for her first 1:1 conference with him on his data. She chose to share only one stat, the superscript. The superscript (a tiny #2) is a lesser-known stat that only appears when a program has assessed that a student may be guessing his way through the answers, not spending a reasonable amount of time referring back to the article and choosing the correct response. In the conference, Benji’s teacher acknowledged his past struggles as a reader and encouraged him to try, just for a couple of weeks, to “make that little number 2 go away.” She reminded Benji that the material was adjusted for his reading level and that he would need to be familiar with it in order to help his team complete an upcoming science challenge that included a design and build (two things Benji loved to do). With a few more on-the-fly reminders during Benji’s online work and a clandestine talk with his parents about how to coach him at home, Benji built up his reading stamina and the superscript magically disappeared from his data. By the time his team began the design challenge, Benji knew as much about the topic as everyone else on his team and, while he was not prepared to call himself a “reader,” Benji was now willing to try.

The Elephant in the 21st Century Classroom

The fields of pro sports and education are each undergoing a revolution driven by data. Coaches across the leagues are leveraging this data to develop their players and teams. And while parallels between the two professions have been drawn before, on this new, rapidly changing “playing field,” sports coaches have an edge over teachers. Coaches are used to “getting in their player’s ear” on the fly when needed and working with them in strategy sessions. By contrast, teachers—even the most experienced and dynamic among them—are not used to the exponential increase in “coaching time” that the new instructional models are bringing to the table.

Data is just the beginning of the challenge they now face. Teachers are now regularly guiding small-group discussions in longer blocks of instruction, meeting in 1:1 conferences or mentoring while students work on personalized learning platforms and serving as guides on the side during increased collaborative time. Less experienced co-teachers who previously would have worked as assistant teachers are now leading small-group instruction and conferring with students, too. It’s no exaggeration to state that the playing field has changed dramatically. Day

school administrators should be proud of their willingness to implement change and provide PD opportunities on blended learning, project-based learning, rotational models and personalized learning, but they may be ignoring the elephant in the 21st century classroom: communication and coaching skills.

What are some takeaways that teachers can take from their peers in pro sports, and what can school administrators do to support them? The starting point should be honing our communication skills in this new coaching environment. Charter school networks are a bit further along on this arc of rapid change and regularly include training in “discussion protocol,” “classroom talk,” and conferencing skills. They provide PD and resources on coaching techniques for both teachers and their supervisors. They know that using data to drive differentiated instruction is only as powerful as the differentiated conversations that will occur in interactions between teachers and students. Teachers who are skilled in the art of differentiated conversation will create classrooms with a shared language and will model that for students when they lead a small group. They will provide focused feedback in conferences and encourage students to do the same in their peer teams. They will also hold small group strategy sessions pre-, post- and “on the fly” mid-assignment to target areas that require intervention, whether in skills mastery or procedure.

Discuss the Decision, Not the Skill

One area in which charter schools have developed solid protocol is process praise. Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion*, advises soccer coaches “to discuss the decision not the skill.” After a win, for example, a good soccer coach should share a stat like number of touches per game so that players could learn to differentiate between a 2–1 victory and a 2–1 victory with more touches. Lemov explains that, as all coaches understand, “In the end, it’s the decision-making that is probably harder to learn than the touch.” Dr. Lee Hancock, a sports psychologist, says that good coaches will “set up the cones” in a post-game coaching session to have players reenact the plays that impacted the game—for good or bad—and then ask the players to discuss the decisions they made during those plays.

If you listen in to the classroom talk in a charter school classroom, at any grade level, you will hear teachers use shared language in highlighting decisions made by students both

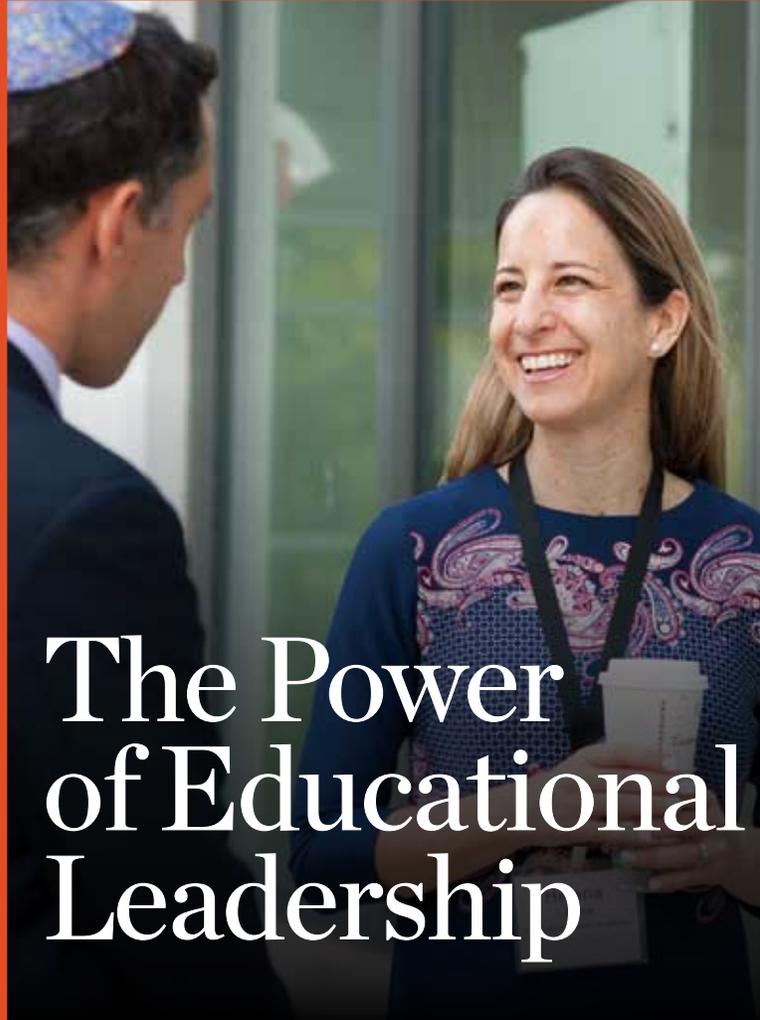
in the teacher-guided small group and in collaborative groups. Teachers will demonstrate what is referred to as “careful eavesdropping,” circulating among the independent groups and pair shares to verbally praise good decision-making among the students. Teachers will then ask students to report back in “postgame strategy sessions” which decisions they made while grappling with a math problem or writing assignment and why they made those decisions. Other students in the group will then share in that conversation about process. Also, many teachers are now assigning groups with growth mindset in mind. They may purposely place two students who have demonstrated a strong growth mindset together with two students who struggle with that but have demonstrated mastery of content.

In the results-driven culture of our day schools, are we providing our students with enough “chances for choices” and verbal challenges to the automaticity of their answers? While many of us pride ourselves in referencing grit and growth mindset in our PD sessions, are we actively modeling for teachers what that in fact sounds like in the small group and how to carefully eavesdrop? Are we helping teachers build “postgame” strategy sessions into their instructional blocks so they can “set up the cones”—deconstruct an activity and revisit the decisions that were made? Are we working with teachers on how to provide process-oriented feedback?

Focused Feedback

For inspiration and demonstration on how to give focused feedback, turning again to sports coaching makes sense. Doug Baldwin, a gifted wide receiver on the Seattle Seahawks, used to struggle with inconsistent performance. Baldwin’s coach is Pete Carroll, a well-loved and celebrated coach known for his intimate coaching style. Carroll helped him create a “mental highlight reel” of moments where he had been successful in his career. Baldwin explained, “Every time I slip back into doubtfulness, I go back to those highlight reels and it puts me in a positive mind.” He visualizes what is going to happen, and it does.

Teachers need to get to know their students as intimately as coaches do their players so they can supply those moments for students to include in their “mental highlight reels.” That takes strong observation and communication skills, a dedication to noticing many things in a variety of ways and recording them. It includes data, but isn’t limited to data. Teachers take notes as they circulate during independent work so they can give differentiated and focused feedback. They are often pulling students in intervention groups during a longer collaborative assignment based on the verbal and nonverbal cues they are getting from students on their comfort level with an assignment.



The Power of Educational Leadership

The Davidson School’s **Leadership Commons** cultivates talented thinkers, doers, and visionaries from all corners of Jewish education.

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- **MaToK: Bible Curriculum for Day Schools**
- **JECALI: Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute**

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To Learn More

Articles

Jelani Jabari, "How Rich is Your Classroom Discourse" The Association for Middle Level Education

Nicolas Pino-James, "Golden Rules for Engaging Students in Learning Activities" Edutopia

"What Is Interactive Modeling?" Responsive Classroom

Chris Harrison, "Banish the Quiet Classroom" *Education Review*

Maddie Witter, "Beyond Q & A: Six Strategies That Motivate ALL Students to Participate" Edutopia

Nancy Zuckerbrod, "For Teachers, Deeper Learning is About Letting Go" Hewlett Foundation

Videos

Growth Mindset, Process Praise

Teaching Channel

"Praise the Process"

"Encouraging Children to Persist Through Challenges"

Focused and Differentiated Feedback, Careful Eavesdropping

Teaching Channel

"Making Feedback Meaningful"

"Document-Based Questions: Warm and Cool Feedback"

Better Lesson

"Personalized Small Group Instruction: Tanesha Dixon, Teacher in Action"

Learn With Two Rivers

"Critique: Collaborating to Improve Our Work"

Resources From Charter School Networks

Expeditionary Learning (EL Education)

NewTech Network

Aspire Schools Network

Two Rivers Public Charter School

To perfect the art of providing good differentiated feedback, teachers in charter schools are observed by peers and supervisors regularly and assessed on the skill. As part of their evaluation package, they are asked to provide supervisors with samples of the detailed notes they have taken on each student during conference time or during their "careful eavesdropping." Then, in data review team meetings, teachers meet with their peers to share student data and notes on feedback so they can get suggestions from their colleagues on how to address the soft spots and reinforce areas of strength. In pro sports, where each team has a coaching staff comprised of multiple coaches, it is normal procedure for the coaching staff to meet and confer about the data so they can devise a plan for the team together. Are we providing time for that in our day schools?

Coaching the Player as a Member of the Team

In addition to developing the individual, both teachers and coaches must work on the ability of the individual to function productively in a team. The 21st century classroom is buzzing with STEM design and engineering challenges and long-term collaborative projects where students are being assessed and self-assessing on their collaboration skills. In his work with the Seahawks, Pete Carroll applies the American Indian concept of "long body" to his coaching, where individuals in the tribe develop a single consciousness. Carroll explains, "That connect- edness is available to us at all times. You have to invest in it to make it come to life." He understands that players "have to act with the team, but they can do that in a way that illuminates who they are. Most people think you can't do that."

Teachers who are proficient in the craft of guided small-group discussion will model that kind of investment for their students. They will verbally acknowledge skills and traits of individual students not just to encourage those students, but also to highlight for their potential teammates the areas in which they excel. Teachers will then follow up on that during independent group work by "getting in the ear" of members of a team to help them notice the strengths of others in addition to their own. In sports coach talk, this is called "looking inward while you look outward." This kind of team-centered focused feedback can make the difference between a productive PBL experience and one that may dissolve in frustration.

Tips and Takeaways

Now that we have revolutionized a student's classroom, we need to revolutionize how he experiences it. What can day school administrators do to support their teachers in doing that? How can you coach teachers to coach?

Professional development. For every PD session that is scheduled on topics like differentiated instruction, designate a portion of the time for discussions on differentiated conversation: careful eavesdropping, process praise and differentiated feedback. Establish discussion and conference protocols. Work on how to choose the right stat to share with students and under which circumstances. Include video clips to illustrate the culture you are trying to create.

A community of coaches. Banish the "my classroom is an island" tone that exists in many schools, and schedule peer observation time within each semester of the school year. Provide common planning time and practice spaces for teachers to "try out" new coaching strategies and brainstorm together ways to use data to drive more meaningful conversations and connections with their students.

Looking outward. Plumb the free and available resources that charter schools provide on their websites, and schedule site visits to high-performing charter schools in your area. Plan "learning targets" for a site visit, and then share those with the host school's administrator. Charter schools are proud of their accomplishments and usually generous with sharing their practice. Give them advance notice of what you hope to see and they will likely tailor the visit to your needs.

With the revolutions on their playing fields, coaches and teachers are seeing greater opportunities for growth in their development of players and students. Just ask Jake Lamb, who made the all-star team this year for the first time, and Benji K., who moved up two Lexile levels in six months. There's a lot to be gained by looking inward and outward as we evolve and grow as professionals in this new landscape. Sports coaches are hustling to up their communication skills to meet the influx of data. They and our peers in the charter-school world are reinforcing good decision-making, focusing feedback with greater intention, and guiding those in their charge to win the games in their head as well as on the field. We owe it to our students to do the same.

SPOTLIGHT ON...

SCHOOL ADVOCATES

Advocacy is the act of speaking on behalf of or in support of another person or idea. Your Prizmah school advocates serve that role and so much more. Our team is focused on making sure that we get you what you need, be it an answer to an administrative or curricular question, information about a Prizmah program or a connection to a colleague. We strive to meet the needs of all our schools, understand the distinct differences among us and see the commonalities that bind us in the field of Jewish education. Your advocates oversee Reshet (networking) opportunities that will bring you in touch with peers who have comparable challenges and want to share with each other to strengthen their programs.

Here are some examples of how the advocates assist schools.

Making Connections

A lot has been written about the loneliness of school leadership. Addressing that loneliness is a key to sustaining the health and happiness of our leaders. As advocates, we listen for threads that connect leaders to one another, whether it's a mutual interest, a common struggle or a new idea to share. At the Prizmah conference, a leader who was wrestling with a particular challenge asked, "Am I the only one who is going through this? Do you see this in other schools?" She wasn't, and we did. We immediately connected her with two peers in schools similar to hers and have since expanded the group to include four more.

One Field

As school advocates, we are tasked with building relationships and communities among schools not only within a particular affinity group but across lines of affiliation. We want to recognize the unique traits of our Reform, Schechter, Ravsak and Yeshiva day schools as well as see what unifies us. Advocates work as a team and are attuned to opportunities that can bring all of our schools together. Prizmah wholeheartedly believes in the power of the day school field as a collective.

This past spring, the school advocates hosted two online webinars about school tefillah, and since those initial meetings, a multid denominational tefillah working group has formed. The conversations school leaders are having with one another—sharing best practices, asking for advice and suggestions, brainstorming together across denominational lines—have exemplified the true power of a field that collaborates and supports one another with a common mission to provide the best Jewish day school education for their students.

Support

When professional and lay leaders have a question about issues at their school, no matter what the size of school or depth of query, they will always get a well-informed answer from their advocate. They are your go-to person for questions about a future search, organizational structure or professional development need. As one board president put it, "My advocate is my one-stop shop!"

Navigating Prizmah

A head of school called and admitted that attention had not been paid to the myriad emails received about so many programs. She did not mean to ignore them and wanted help understanding what Prizmah was offering and what has relevance for her school. The advocate was able to explain each one and connect her to learn more about the programs that interested her. One phone call got her all she needed.

Learning Together

Our affinity Reshet groups will bring resources, learning and networking opportunities to meet the unique needs of each of our groups of schools. Be it sharing a denominationally focused article or bringing a speaker to address a need, these groups are geared to you and your school. Advocates will work with school leaders to determine the areas you want to discuss.

Contact us, we are here for you.

Rabbi Yechiel Shaffer, Yeshiva Day School Advocate: yechiels@prizmah.org

Traci Stratford, Pardes School Advocate: tracis@prizmah.org

Amy Wasser, Director of School Advocacy and Ravsak School Advocate: amyw@prizmah.org

Daniel Weinberg, Schechter School Advocate: danielw@prizmah.org

ML GAMLIEL

Divergent Minds, Convergent Molds

Creative Students in Religious Education

Following the Torah maxim to teach a student *ke-darko*, according to the way he or she learns best, many Jewish day schools today feature programs for differentiated learning and implement best practices in progressive education. No matter how much time a teacher spends differentiating lessons, however, an outlier student with an assortment of unusual talents offset by daydreaming or intense emotionality may stubbornly elude understanding even from the most caring teacher or administrator. Such students may catch lessons quickly but ask offbeat questions or deviate from school norms. At times their insights seem “genius,” but it would certainly ease teaching if they could march to the beat of the standardized drum occasionally.

Research identifies creatively gifted students as possessing cognitive and emotional assets that may prove particularly challenging in their encounter with religious education. As a result, these students may even face greater risks for depression and defection. Understanding and helping them can improve the wellbeing not only of these unique gifted individuals, but also of the entire community.

The “Rule” of Nonconformity

Research has demonstrated that those with “creative” personalities and cognitive dispositions possess a drive for nonconformity, expression of individualism and openness to change. Creative students do not aim to deviate from group norms; their brains are simply wired to think “outside the box,” whether interacting with a lesson or assignment, and sometimes even in social situations. According to founding fathers of creativity research J.P. Guilford, Frank Barron, Mark Runco and others, the heightened skill of creative people in divergent thinking makes them “consistently original.”

By nature they are curious and inquisitive; they crave and resonate with learning that is hidden at first glance, tolerating the mystery

of ambiguity to gain the joy of discovery. To others they may be “interesting,” “daring” or “opinionated,” and may even display skill in the arts or science. They are disposed to search, explore and accept the unknown, and stay open to multiple outcomes until they personally feel satisfied—often longer than others can tolerate. Once satisfied, however, they are even willing to stand alone in a crowd to express their truth.

In settings that value innovation and progress, these students are often identified as “most likely to succeed” in cultural, scientific and business endeavors. But in a religious school, they may be kicked out of class. If we are looking for one specific right answer, how can their novel suggestions be reconciled with Jewish tradition? If “innovation” triggers a red flag, how can their assets be appreciated, if not leveraged to help them grow and thrive?

Sensitive Souls

Creative students also reveal strength in emotional connectedness, which translates into a “spiritual” orientation when it comes to prayer and mitzvah observance. According to most research on spirituality, this construct can be distinguished as the desire for a personal connection to God, a connectedness to one’s self through the search for meaning, and connectedness to others, including those outside one’s immediate faith group. Authentic emotional connection signals the satisfying experience they seek, whereas cognitive dissonance can arise from perceived disconnect between words and action, actions and meaning, or lack of respect to those who follow different beliefs or customs.

In some Jewish schools, emphasis may be placed more on behavioral outcomes than on the affective dimension of religious expression. It is arguably harder to teach and assess feelings of connection than external displays of religiosity such as attendance, recitation of words and ritual performance. Jewish law and philosophy seem to assert the importance of behavior over emotional connection, with the Shulchan Arukh (Orah Chaim 98:2) and Mishnah Brurah (101:1) rendering kavvanah as optional, and Rav Chaim of Volozhin’s insistence that “man’s actions, not the spiritual zeal that may underlie and animate them, are the sine qua non for his ability to draw close to God” (Nefesh HaChaim, ch. 4).

Neglecting spiritual zeal may ease educational needs, fulfill the mitzvah and even work well for the communal majority. But, for individuals particularly disposed to emotionality and spiritual connectedness, minimizing the value of kavvanah can leave these students feeling alienated rather than respected for their innate strength in these areas. Ironically, if those same students persist through years of struggle to a rabbinic position, they are often praised for their profound insights or ability to deeply connect to others. In school they may be penalized for their drive for self-expression or self-understanding, but only until they succeed in graphic design or a career helping others. Increased emphasis on the values of kavvanah or mindfulness, self-understanding and respect for differences may be important for everyone, but a lack of these values can alienate some students from Judaism entirely.

Can Autonomy, Freedom and Flexibility be Jewish Values?

According to researchers such as Teresa Amabile, Mark Runco and Gerard Saucier, creative and sensitive students have a heightened need for independence of thought, exploration and choice. If these basic needs are not met sufficiently, even in public schools creative students can experience depression and drop out. One quarter of divergently gifted students can be misunderstood or go unrecognized, leading to higher levels of stress and even suicide. Can this also happen in our religious communities? While every student may not experience unmanageable pain in situations lacking autonomy and flexibility, for individuals hard-wired to need this freedom, can we risk losing them?

Differentiation for students gifted with creative and spiritual strengths may not come in the form of a classroom lesson, but can at least be considered. While they may appear to be deviant, these students seek to learn deeply and have the potential to be inspirational leaders. If gifted in the arts, they may be able to create powerful works impacting change in the hearts of others, works of beauty providing enjoyment and carrying the values of Judaism. Can simchah and non-didactic learning, as well as preserving the wellbeing of talented, sensitive students be offered places of importance in Jewish education on par with knowledge of Halakhah and Gemara or attendance in services?

Differentiation for “Creatives”

Artist and educational theorist Elliot Eisner offers some interesting suggestions for addressing creative students. He proposes ideas such as teaching “multiple literacies,” whereby all students learn to compose or meditate and students gifted in these areas can be rewarded. He suggests intentionally leaving space in any classroom lesson for the possibility of off-track questions that can lead to unanticipated, or what he calls “expressive,” outcomes.

Just as we prioritize learning support for struggling students, we may need to also consider support for students who require accelerated or independent learning and exploration. Divergent thinking and emotional sensitivity are strengths of these students; thinking broadly and abstractly comes naturally to them. Limiting their education to “one right answer” can actually cause them angst. These students are not aiming

to challenge teachers or the Torah system—unless, of course, they see something that warrants change. They can be our visionaries and innovators in Torah if these values can be embraced rather than resisted. We can offer these students esteem and personal growth if we create programs designed for their unique “special needs” within a Torah framework.

Some Tips for Teachers and Administrators

Below are some practical suggestions for helping creative students thrive.

Teaching kavannah as a skill or “literacy.” Some teachers may also have natural gifts in spirituality or creativity. Allow these teachers to run short programs in mindfulness. Some kids will struggle, but those with the “knack” can excel and even tutor others. Intrapersonal skills may not be easy to learn, but not everyone thinks math is easy either!

Respect questions or creative interpretations of a pasuk. While unusual questions can seem like a distraction, they may emerge from authentic curiosity. A novel insight can sound presumptuous, but may be the result of a mind able to juxtapose multiple existing ideas to form a completely new one.

Respect the questioner. The notion that adults know best in all situations may not be appreciated by students, least of all gifted ones. Modeling authenticity, humility and sincerity in seeking truth can inspire anyone, but most importantly connect those who are particularly repelled by hypocrisy.

Don’t say “special.” No one likes to feel like an alien. Not even a good alien. Many gifted students hide their gifts because they fear social marginalization or bullying. They can recognize their differences and may become a target for them.

Accept blue shirts. It may be entirely possible that caring, loving, intelligent human beings who strive to be close to God and others, to understand themselves and their unique purpose in the world, also want to dress with flair, or express themselves uniquely. They don’t want to violate rules or show off; they simply find joy in expressing their thoughts and desires in their own voice. Allowing small deviations from a norm will not necessarily lead to breaking Shabbat. Black and white, both physically and philosophically, may work perfectly for most people. But in the end, do we really know what color shirt God wants us to wear?

MIRIAM HEYMAN
SHIRA RUDERMAN

Differentiation in an Inclusive Classroom

Special educators have delivered differentiated instruction for decades. After all, the rationale for enrolling students in special education is that in this setting, they will receive more individualized and specialized attention than would be available in regular education. Special education classes are almost always smaller than regular education classes; they have as few as six students with one teacher and one or more paraprofessionals. The assumption is that the special education teacher can focus on the precise learning needs of each student. Each lesson plan contains a variety of activities or access points into the curriculum. Teaching assistants monitor each of the different activities.

Federal law mandates that public school students with disabilities be educated in the “least restrictive environment” that is appropriate according to their specific needs. For many students with disabilities, the least restrictive environment is the general education classroom, where they learn alongside their peers without disabilities. Since we as a profession are confident that inclusive education is ideal, we have devoted attention to determining how best to implement inclusive education.

Differentiated instruction has become the engine for implementing inclusion. General education teachers are now infusing flexibility into their lesson plans, so that all students have the opportunity to engage deeply with the material. When you observe a second grade classroom today, you might find some students solving arithmetic problems with pencil and paper, while other students are using concrete manipulatives to solve the same problems. Facilitating instruction in this way is not an easy feat, especially since general education classes often have 20 or more students. Yet the teacher is still responsible for planning and supervising differentiated learning that is tailored to meet the needs of each child in his or her care.

Teachers have created brilliant strategies to meet the challenge of providing differentiated instruction in the 21st century classroom. Some of these strategies are described here, and the further questions that they raise and the new directions for the field will be discussed.

Many teachers recognize that a well-organized classroom can put in place a level of differentiation. It is now standard to see a classroom library organized according to reading level. Books have different colored dots on them, representing different reading levels. Students as young as first grade know how to select a book that will provide a moderate amount of challenge: challenging enough to improve their skills but not so challenging as to be frustrating. The mindset that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach enables students who do not

have identified disabilities to receive instruction that is more individualized. It gives all children more choice and empowerment than existed when there was a teacher who stood at the front of the room and delivered the exact same lesson to all 20 students who sat before her.

Nonetheless, regardless of whether we categorize books as “A books” and “B books” or use red and blue dots, kids know who the “good readers” are. They also know who is struggling. And let’s be honest, kids can be mean. Left unanswered is how to facilitate differentiated instruction and simultaneously ensure a classroom environment that is welcoming and supportive of difference. This is a primary challenge for teachers today. We live in an era of competition and cyberbullying, and as we appropriately move towards more inclusive education, our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse.

So not only do teachers provide multiple access points to the material, they can also use this opportunity to teach tolerance and respect for differences. Continuing with the example of reading level, teachers can empower students to choose a “just right book” for themselves. They teach strategies such as, Choose a book and read the first page. Count with your fingers the words that you cannot figure out. If you have five or more fingers up, you should pick a different book. If you have four fingers or fewer, you have a “just right” book! Such strategies enable children to take control of their own learning. They are taught to be proud of correctly identifying an appropriate book, and they can make this choice subtly. Meanwhile, the fact that the teacher might deliver an *entire* lesson on choosing a “just right” book signals to the class that there is diversity within the room, and this diversity is normal and appropriate.

In a sense, then, the teacher is preparing the students for the diversity that they will encounter throughout their academic, professional and social lives. At the same time, it instills within each student a sense of responsibility for selecting their own challenges. This is a valuable lesson in self-advocacy, a critical skill for students to acquire while they are still in our care. Students with disabilities must be effective self-advocates. For example, college students with disabilities do not receive academic accommodations unless they request them and provide the necessary documentation. Even if younger students don’t need these skills yet, it is never too early to plant the seeds. Self-knowledge and self-advocacy are also important for students without disabilities, as they begin to select colleges, go on interviews and make career decisions.

Teachers must undertake all of these tasks at a time when others are writing about whether teachers are needed at all. In 2015, *The Atlantic* published a provocative article titled “The Deconstruction of the K-12 Teacher,” which asked, “When kids get their lessons from the Internet, what’s left for classroom instructors to do?” The need for differentiated instruction in the inclusive classroom renders this question irrelevant. Teachers are still responsible for selecting material for each student and interacting with students in a way that ensures meaningful engagement with the material, whether this material is finger paint or an article on the Internet. They are also on the front line of efforts to raise a generation of children who are respectful of difference, celebrate diversity and take personal responsibility. Teachers still have plenty to do.

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COMMENTARY

TEACHING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Tikvah Wiener, head of school, The Idea School, a co-ed Orthodox school to open in 2018 using interdisciplinary, project-based learning, Bergen Country, New Jersey:

Tomlinson's words make me wonder about what would happen if we thought completely differently about the way we track students. Of course, we need to offer each student the support, structure and enrichment that she needs to succeed, but we also have to challenge each child and find the way to unlock his potential and individual strengths. By offering students many entry points into learning—textual, visual, audio, tactile, for example—and the ability to show their learning through different media, we give them a chance to show the way in which they're "smart." We also have to make sure kids who are strong in different areas—the traditional academic subjects, the arts, STEM, making, interpersonal skills, etc.—get to bump up against each other all day long. Removing kids from the influence of their peers and the knowledge they can gain from each other eliminates a powerful avenue of learning for them. We create positive peer pressure when we enable students to see that each person contributes something valuable to learning.

Beth Fine, Judaics coordinator and instructional coach, The Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle:

While the work on growth mindset and its significance in fueling student progress is well accepted in education today, many settings are only beginning to grapple with applying this same lens to coaching, supervision and evaluation of teachers. Do schools consistently consider teachers as humans with infinite possibility who are thirsty to grow in skill and confidence? How do we set, in collaboration with teachers, appropriate expectations of both performance and progress, given this mindset? How do administrators balance a belief in teacher potential with the need to respond to parent complaints? How does this approach differ when working with a first-year teacher or a 20-year veteran? What is the responsibility of teachers to actively engage in learning and share their goals, their experiments, their ups and downs with colleagues and supervisors in order to include others in the journey of growth? In other words, how do we balance professional standards with the belief in the growth mindset of teachers?

Recent work in neuroscience and psychology reveals two findings that should be central in **educational planning**. First, virtually all brains are malleable. **When we teach as though students are smart,** they become smarter. Second, a related but separate body of research indicates that teachers who believe firmly in the **untapped capacity of each learner,** and thus set out to demonstrate to students that by working hard and working smart they can achieve impressive goals, get far better results than teachers who believe some students are smart, others are not, and little can be done to change that. It's difficult to grow brains and help students **develop growth mindsets** in remedial contexts.

**Carol Ann Tomlinson,
"Differentiation Does, in Fact, Work"**

Rabbi Joe Hirsch, lead learning designer and fourth grade Judaic studies teacher, Akiba Academy of Dallas; author, *The Feedback Fix*:

Differentiation isn't just great practice—it's a communication art form. When teachers right-size their methods and materials, they deliver a powerful message about learning and leading. Every student can become a source and force for knowledge. With differentiation, we show the hidden power and potential of every individual. That's exactly the kind of feedback students need to hear from us today.

Gussie Singer, director of intervention services, Joseph & Florence Mandel Jewish Day School, Beachwood, Ohio:

Tomlinson eloquently expresses a truth that is experienced and known by many: Education is about relationships. What we as teachers see in our students guides how we teach them, how they learn and, furthermore, what they can achieve. Our expectations have great power. Tomlinson declares that we have to believe emphatically, earnestly, in the capacity of every child to exceed expectations that have been set before, not because it's sentimental and the right thing to do, not just because it's a moral or spiritually sound orientation, but because the science tells us so. Brains can change, and hard work is as much a factor in

academic achievement as IQ.

If we know this to be true, then how are we, as teachers, thinking about our role differently? How are we changing our classroom goals? How are we observing and getting to know our students in the first critical weeks of school, differently? How are we, as school administrators and leaders, starting the year? What inspiration do we offer our teachers to look at a child differently and embrace the power that a teacher's mindset has in shaping a child's life? How are we creating school spaces, schedules and dialogue that will provide us a path to shifting our mindset? Importantly, how are we caring for our teachers, so that they have the energy, creativity and will to go out on a limb for each child?

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DIFFERENTIATION IN CLASS





JOHN ENGLANDER
LISA MICLEY

Differentiation in the Online Classroom

Train a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it.

This simple advice from Proverbs fosters a style of teaching that helps students reach their fullest potential as learners, and it speaks to the crucial development of a lifelong love of learning. It states a basic and profound truth: Each of us is unique; each of us learns “according to his [or her] way.” Who would have thought that one of the buzzwords in education, differentiated instruction, has been a part of the ancient canon of Jewish wisdom all along?

Yet believing in the value and power of differentiated instruction and actually implementing it are two very different endeavors. Consider this definition of differentiated instruction from ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) that begins to reveal some of its inherent challenges:

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching in which educators actively plan for students' differences so that all students can best learn. In a differentiated classroom, teachers divide their time, resources and efforts to effectively teach students who have various backgrounds, readiness and skill levels, and interests.

The effort to differentiate instruction may overwhelm teachers. Getting through the content and standards that need to be taught to their students can take major focus and effort, let alone trying to cater to the learning styles and abilities of each individual student. Preparing different types of lessons for different

types of students, to make the learning more effective and efficient, can be a monumental task. For some teachers, this is a paradigm shift in how they teach.

Today, online classrooms can provide the means to address the demands of differentiated instruction. Online learning can be an ideal environment for differentiation because teachers are able to customize the way students access information, vary the course pacing for individual students, and quickly assess the manner in which individual students—or groups of students—demonstrate understanding of the content.

The very experience of learning in an online classroom is, in itself, a personal and individual one for each student. Lesson content can be easily adapted for different populations. New technology tools in online courses, such as the text reader ReadSpeaker, can be used to support students with limited English skills or proficiency in reading, as well as students who are visually impaired.

The scheduling flexibility of online learning provides another nuanced strategy for differentiated instruction. Each of us experiences fluctuations in our capacity to process information. Perhaps you are a “night owl,” most energetic and alert late at night. Maybe you experience peak levels of concentration and focus in the morning hours when brain activity is humming along like a well-oiled machine. Or maybe each day is different for how and when you learn best. For teens, such fluctuations are amplified as factors such as brain development, hormones, diet and lack of sleep lead to varying levels of engagement and processing throughout any given day. The



asynchronous online classroom can capitalize on student motivation and inspiration as the student can engage in learning at times when he or she is most alert and open to receiving information.

Imagine if teachers could clone themselves to be in several locations in their classroom at the same time, teaching distinct groups of students various types of lessons that cater to the group's needs. Sounds like something you might read in a Harry Potter novel! In essence, the asynchronous online classroom offers this very possibility. Multiple teaching strategies and lessons that address the same learning objective can be created before the course even begins. Teachers then monitor student performance to determine which lessons might be best for which students, and can individualize the learning pathway for their students. This allows students at both ends of the spectrum, and anywhere in between, to benefit from online learning.

In the Online Judaic Studies Consortium's (OJSC) introductory course on Mishnah, teachers tailor the activity to the skillset of the student, providing slightly different assignments to students based on their ability to synthesize and interpret information. For example, students may be asked to demonstrate their understanding via a structured worksheet while others are pushed to identify and articulate the *reisha* and *seifa* of the text on their own. Advanced students might be asked to incorporate additional commentaries into their explication to the class in a paragraph, podcast or vlog. When shared with the class via a structured class discussion, struggling learners benefit from the models of more advanced learners, while

reflecting and commenting on their contributions to the activity.

Of course, even in the world of online learning, no technology or algorithm can approach the effectiveness of student-to-teacher communication and interaction, whether online or off. For the majority of students, building a relationship and getting direct feedback and guidance from a competent teacher will always be a major ingredient for learning, especially when it comes to Judaic studies course work. A private online discussion area, for example, can provide the ideal environment for the teacher to suggest modifications for the student and for the student to articulate challenges he or she is having with the material and or its presentation. The same opportunity can be offered to any student who is hesitant to share his writing with the class. As the student grows in confidence in response to the feedback of the teacher, he or she can return to the class discussion and participate with the group.

For those students who can handle—and might require—more challenging materials, teachers in an online setting can easily adapt instruction by adding lesson content and additional exploratory resources. These materials are part of the course as it is developed and are available to any student seeking greater challenge, while individual students requiring more challenge can be encouraged to explore the additional materials. These additional materials might be source sheets with related texts and commentaries or supplementary readings and discussion prompts or other activities through which the students reflect on what they have read.

Perhaps the most important aspect of differentiated instruction in the online classroom is demonstrated through varied assessment strategies. Student understanding can be assessed in both traditional and innovative ways: through discussion and journaling, group projects, activities that require students to produce works of art or creative writing, and many other types of teaching strategies that are assessed. In the context of Judaic studies courses online, this might take the form of practicing introspection in a prayer journal, demonstrating creativity in a Siddur Companion project, or even practicing the middah of gratitude in their own lives by creating gratitude lists and reflecting on the experience. Using varied assessment strategies is good practice in any classroom, be it online or face to face. The online course provides flexibility for the teacher to deliver the most appropriate assessment approach based on the student's needs.

Each year at Pesach we are instructed in the pedagogy of differentiated instruction. The importance of training the child “according to his way” is the core pedagogic approach in the section on the Four Children. We are not instructed to give each child the same response to his or her inquiry about the history of our people. Rather, we are shown that the most effective means of teaching is always to meet the learner where he or she is, to take into consideration the perspective and current developmental stage of the child. And in so doing, we hope our message reaches the student and helps him or her grow in understanding and critical-thinking skills. If we've done our jobs and we're lucky, “when he grows old, he will not turn away from [the learning].”

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following content:

- Page title: 13.3 Practicing Gratitude (הכרת הטוב)
- Section title: 13.3 Practicing Gratitude (הכרת הטוב)
- A "Listen" button with a play icon.
- Main text: "There's always *something* to be thankful for, am I right?"
- A large blue graphic with the word "GRATITUDE" in white, pixelated letters.
- Image source: ©OJSC, Inc.
- Introductory text: "There are so many things worthy of our gratitude (even though it may not always feel that way). For some of us, coming up with a list of things for which we are thankful is not always a simple task. Let's face it: although we all have our good days, life also has its share of tough days. That's just how it is. At one point or another, we each..."

MATT WILLIAMS

DIFFERENTIATION AS UNAVOIDABLE REALITY

Differentiated instruction (DI), as a pedagogical technique, has high aspirations. It aims to create a personalized classroom experience for each student, one that allows a degree of ownership and access far more than the types of classes most students experience today. A class that's ultimately student-responsive, the argument for DI goes, is not just an educational good, insofar as it compels students to individually engage and own particular subjects. It is also, fundamentally, a moral good. It democratizes the classroom and turns a vehicle that was once used to produce like-minded bureaucrats into the independent, critical thinkers valued by today's economy and society.

DI, of course, has its detractors. Some feel that it is onerous: How can one teacher be expected to teach simultaneously in 20 different ways? This far outstrips the demands that can logically, let alone ethically, be placed on any employee. Equally if not more troubling is that personalization can be a pathway to deviance. Some believe that allowing students to follow their own paths, without expert guidance, only leads to trouble: lowering standards of quality, encouraging the wallowing in falsehoods, and perhaps even leading to some to subject-specific blasphemy (whether in Judaics or mathematics).

What both DI's advocates and detractors miss, though, is that it is already an unavoidable reality. Teachers have only a certain amount of instructional time, and it can be monopolized quite quickly. Various studies have shown that extroverts, boys, high achievers, those with learning disabilities, and those whom the teacher simply likes more—all can easily monopolize the bandwidth of even the most well-intentioned educator. In other words, teachers already differentiate based on a variety of criteria. The question, then, is not, To DI or not to DI? but, To what extent can educators DI intentionally?

For me, this question hits uncomfortably close to my own educational practice. Two years into teaching, I came to the realization that my enthusiasm for my subject was unintentionally limiting the types of students I could reach. On the drive home after a particularly difficult class, I asked myself, what if my students'

apathy was not about the subject per se and more about my own inability to understand how they might be able to connect with it?

My love of my discipline, on a good day, may have resonated with a quarter of my students. Teaching those students was a joy. But I realized that being an educator meant finding a way to reach as many of my students as possible. It meant creating slightly less alienating experiences for students who felt that educational institutions are, intrinsically, disenfranchising. Reflecting on my own education, too, I wondered whether my personal inclination toward a particular subject reflected not my own interest but rather more my teachers' passion. What if I was guilty of allowing the love I had for my subject to limit the love my students might develop, if I could only get myself, my ego, out of the way?

This realization disabused me of a claimed shared by both DI proponents and detractors. Namely, that I could have control over my classroom. I don't mean control in a disciplinary, classroom-management sense. I mean the hubris to think it was I who knew how to connect students to a subject in the best way. While I might be an expert in my subject, I knew I could never be an expert in the many and varied ways in which my students experienced my classroom.

Differentiated instruction, on a higher plane, became a question not of what tools or strategies I use to allow my students ownership and access. It became a question about how I could design a classroom that took seriously the fact that students are the ultimate arbiters of their learning experience. For me, the question at the heart of DI was simple: How do you build a classroom for people who can choose to tune you out anytime they want?

And therein lies the rub. Differentiation insists that the core question of education design shifts from, How can I get my students to the curricular benchmarks I've set? to, How can I build various experiences for students to opt into?

In a world where students can wait out, tune out or fake out teachers by "doing school" instead of actually learning, this shift in thinking matters now more than ever.

To Know Him Is to Know How to Teach Him (or Her)

Relationship as the Key to Differentiation

The dynamic flexibility of the Montessori classroom allows endless modifications to be made to meet the needs of students with all types of complex learning profiles, but all of these opportunities translate into learning successes only when entrusted to teachers who are fully engaged with their students. The freedom of movement and choice of activities throughout the day allow teachers ample time to circulate in the classroom and interact with each child, to share quiet moments, to learn about their sense of humor, to understand how their mind works. This constant and consistent interaction leads to deep, personal relationships that alert teachers to students' likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears, and perhaps most importantly, driving interests. It is only from the vantage point which the teacher gains based on this relational model that the true work of differentiation in the classroom can begin.

Among the findings of contemporary educational psychology is the impact of interest on learning outcomes. Experience has taught us that more than the varied modalities available in a Montessori classroom, the intentionality of the teachers in developing honest and meaningful relationships with students allows them to devise and implement new learning strategies that benefit a broad spectrum of learners simply by tailoring the learning experience to their interests and passions. In this type of relationship, the child feels successful not only as a student but as a person.

In the case of Keren, a student with dyslexia, the solution to her struggles developed over time, with careful attention to her personality. Socially and emotionally precocious, highly verbal and bursting with artistic creativity, she entered first grade clearly reading far below grade level. Within weeks of beginning school, this normally bubbly and gregarious child became sullen and weepy. She no longer wanted to go to school. But over the course of that year and since, a cadre of devoted, empathic educators have learned to understand, support, encourage and even celebrate Keren's learning style. Through third grade, school remained quite challenging for Keren academically. She worked privately with a reading specialist as well as a vision therapist outside of school. But the relationships her teachers invested in with her allowed her to blossom and develop confidence, self-esteem, and most importantly, the willingness to take risks.

Modifications have included minimizing visual clutter in her works and planner, incorporating artistic elements to both her Judaic and general studies work whenever possible, and finding age-appropriate literature hand-picked for her. This past year in particular, when Keren was struggling with multiplication facts, multiples and factoring, a teacher noted her avid interest in fashion and clothing design and thought she might have a solution. As Keren is an accomplished seamstress, the teacher created a quilting activity to help her internalize the material. Keren immediately took to the work, began to understand the concepts, and felt proud to be working successfully on something that had seemed so difficult. At other times this past year, you might find Keren reading the Ivy and Bean series that her teacher brought in from home, acting out a pasuk from Navi, or teaching another student the fundamentals of sewing. Each one of these activities was born out of the deep and meaningful relationships the teachers have developed with Keren over the year. This is the reason she will say that her teachers know "how to teach [her] exactly right" and the reason she couldn't wait to go back to school in September.

Yitzchak came to Netivot in second grade. Diagnosed with a myriad of learning disabilities as well as Tourette's Syndrome, he was in need of support both academically and emotionally. When he first arrived, Yitzchak was completely shut down; he was unavailable to learn and untrusting of those who were trying to teach him. Behaviorally,



his profile was also complicated, as he vacillated between sullen withdrawal and brazen misbehavior. It would take a sincerely dedicated teacher to offer unwavering support and wait patiently for Yitzchak to open up and show something of his inner self. Over time, Yitzchak's teacher learned that he was extremely talented with his hands and loved woodworking. The teacher began to create woodworking projects just for Yitzchak, and his sense of confidence began to grow. His teacher learned that Yitzchak was kind and caring and sensitive, and that he enjoyed the app Musically. And slowly Yitzchak began to trust his teacher.

Yitzchak's teacher understood that when he maintained a narrow band of academic expectation and bolstered Yitzchak's strengths to heal his weaknesses, Yitzchak became more invested in his work. His teacher made it clear that he didn't blame him for his faults, but he also held him accountable for his assignments. He encouraged Yitzchak to try a hard math problem or read a pasuk and reassured him, "If you don't get it on your own, I will help you." This made Yitzchak feel safe enough to try. As the relationship between Yitzchak and his teacher deepened, his academic progress followed suit. Although there have been intermittent obstacles along the way, this past spring Yitzchak successfully competed sixth grade, and he started middle school this fall. He left the safety of his old teacher behind, but he is open and ready to meet new ones.

Yitzchak and Keren's success can be attributed to relationship-driven differentiation. And this phenomenon is reported by schools throughout the Jewish Montessori movement. A new student, Chezkie, a hard worker and very devoted to his studies, exhibited great difficulties in many of his Judaic subjects. His teacher realized that his lack of basic Hebrew reading skills was the cause of his struggles. Without the core skills of Hebrew reading, he had a hard time deciphering text, participating in class and completing assignments, and this affected his academic success and confidence. Over time, the teacher came to observe that the student's Hebrew reading challenge also caused him tremendous embarrassment, and he was therefore avoiding conversation on the subject. The teacher spent the next few months building a strong relationship with Chezkie, sitting next to him "just to shmooze" and cultivating a sense of genuine camaraderie. After a deep trust was built, the teacher broached the subject of Hebrew reading with Chezkie. Not only did he admit the need for help, he agreed to work with the teacher one-on-one twice a week. Given time and lots of hard work, Chezkie's Hebrew reading skills improved along with his self-confidence.

The ability of Montessori classrooms to sustain differentiated instruction is often credited to the outward trappings of the method: manipulative materials, hands-on experiences, choice-driven learning. Indeed, all of these cannot be overlooked. But peel back the layers of the classroom experience,

and what truly paves the way for successful differentiation is the carefully cultivated relationships between teachers and children, the day-to-day attention to and investment in each child's essential self. It doesn't take the iconic counting beads or moveable alphabet or three-dimensional grammar symbols of Montessori to provide differentiation. Rather, it takes the investment of time in personal interactions with students and the willingness to listen closely as the child tells us, directly or indirectly, how they are meant to be taught.



JM LEVINE



A Mindful Approach to Differentiated Classrooms

Kindness Matters

The seminal ingredient of a successfully differentiated classroom is mindfulness. In cultivating mindfulness, specifically in the form of kindness, we create a true community of learners in a meaningful, not superficial, way. It is critical that all children feel competent in a differentiated classroom, and it is the teacher's job to make sure that happens as often as possible. This starts with teachers being self-compassionate, teaching children that kindness matters and fostering the understanding that some children are not more equal than others.

If we set the bar for differentiation at the level of providing scaffolding or alternative assignments, then we've missed the mark. Philosophically and ethically, differentiation is, at its core, being mindful of all the ways we craft our differentiation and being watchful that no one is marginalized because of these differences. In the olden days, when children were placed in delineated reading groups (aka ability groups), it was very clear to everyone which students were in the low group. Educators need to take care that in differentiating the instruction, the scaffolding materials do not inadvertently recreate that sorting system. An inspection of overheard conversations between students and teachers tells us whether we are being successful.

The spirit of differentiating the curriculum is to meet children where they are so they can move forward. If we agree that learning is geared not just to the student as an individual but involves social behavior, then it is more than necessary to factor mindfulness and specifically kindness into the equation. Kindness needs to be the guiding principle, the principle which shapes our interactions and pedagogy. Kindness matters. It matters if someone—a teacher or student—gets embarrassed because of her current ability. It matters if class members (including teachers) are sorting children based upon highly esteemed workbooks (for example, a challenging math series) or lowly worksheets (for example, a more skill-based approach with much reinforcement and repetition). It matters if some children roll their eyes when a student, particularly a student who speaks profusely, contributes to a discussion. It is unkind to speak when other people are talking, whether it is student to student, teacher to student, or teacher to teacher. Educators must insist on kindness if we are aiming to create a safe learning environment for all of our students.

A Mindful Teacher

A mindful teacher models and lives what he hopes his students will eventually own: self-awareness, self-compassion and the ability to honestly critique his interactions. Plenty has been written about teacher burnout and the need for educators to self-nurture. The gift of self-care is a step in a healthy direction; developing a mindful practice is another. A mindful practice requires a keen awareness of everything that is said and done. It requires thinking through things slowly. Mindfulness requires active and thoughtful listening. A mindful practice presents in heightened sensitivity to and appreciation of the environment. Most importantly, a mindful teacher treats himself with kindness. He models his expectations for students. That is, when the teacher demonstrates self-compassion, his students may learn by observation.

Mindfulness is not about tips and tricks; it is about truly giving children age-appropriate responsibilities and real reasons to think about their own learning and behavior. Mindfulness helps students take care of their own hearts and teaches them to live by the consequences of their choices. For example, in a mindful classroom during DEAR-time (Drop Everything And Read), children might select their own reading materials. Ideally, the classroom library books are sorted topically, without obvious reading-ability notations (i.e., Lexile numbers, color coding, etc.), so a student needs to actually consider if a particular book is an appropriate choice. Trusting a child to make that choice sends an empowering message: It reminds that student that she has the tools to make a thoughtful selection. That is, trusting students to make some significant learning choices and having them experience success because of those choices, paves a path for the teacher to continue empowering student to proceed on a mindful approach to their learning.

Follow-up conversations might ask a student if she feels the book is a good fit. Allowing the child to reflect on her choices may help develop self-awareness. In turn, being able to discern “yes, this is a good fit” or “no, it’s a stretch” is a lesson in self-compassion. The endgame is having a child treat herself kindly, with whatever decision she makes. For example, if the book is a big stretch, the student can grant herself permission to ask to select a different book or to take the book home to read with an adult. She treats herself kindly through her mindful choices.

A Student in a Mindful Classroom

Of course a mindful teacher’s pedagogical skills are spot on: That isn’t the issue. Anyone can provide multiple entry points for students. All of us can take ongoing anecdotal records, write learner profile narratives and develop performance-based assessment. The challenge is finding ways to do that so that students aren’t sorted because of the scaffolding. When assignments or expectations differ among students, there is always a possibility of students being unkind to each other. Being mindful of the danger that scaffolding can function as ability groups keeps the mindful teacher on her toes.

Teachers have a handful of tools to help students become aware and accepting of difference. Class meetings are a viable tool for opening discussions about accepting differences. Students can have opportunities to work cooperatively, so they can experience firsthand that everyone has something to offer. Giving children venues to discuss how they feel about the work they are doing in the classroom, whether anonymously or not, is yet another possibility. Students may have surprisingly thoughtful insights. Students are well aware of the academic

and social hierarchy. But being at the top of the hierarchy heap does not provide a “pass” for opting out of being kind. Kindness needs to be the anchor upon which all interactions are based.

Insisting that a student treats himself kindly may help that student widen his lens to kindness. That is a big leap in thought, but little by little kindness begets kindness. Outwardly modelling kindness by incorporating language such as “Be patient with yourself” and asking questions like “How does that make you feel?” cultivates self-awareness and eventually self-compassion. A mindful teacher encourages students to check in with themselves. The hope is that children will internalize the language of mindfulness until it becomes self-talk. The goal is that students habitually ask “Is it kind?” and self-correct if it isn’t.

A Mindful Classroom, Always a Work in Progress

There are tools and resources to refer to and reflect upon to move toward mindful practices in a differentiated classroom. Most of these resources speak to these practices as a means to an end: impulse control, anger management and lowering anxiety. While these are all worthwhile, kindness is the seminal goal. In a book called *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, the author presents valuable activities for practicing mindfulness. The Responsive Classroom model also resonates with a mindful approach idea. However, a mindful classroom takes the concept of community a bit further. In a mindful classroom, children make important choices about what to learn, whom to learn with, how to learn and where to work. All of these decisions are made with a keen eye towards being kind to herself and the members of her class.

Educators need to set the expectation that it is not enough to provide exemplary units with different points of access. We need to set the bar higher for ourselves, our students and our schools. As well, we need to expect students to do more than just go for the A. Good grades should be gravy, secondary to working kindly with each other.

There is always room for more kindness. Kindness should determine the way we treat individuals and the way we run our classrooms. Kindness is an essential ingredient of a differentiated classroom, most specifically because our classroom contains a wide swath of humanity and is a microcosm of the world outside of our classrooms. The habit of cultivating mindfulness and particularly kindness are ones that we hope student carry with them throughout their lives and bring into the world outside of school. Mindfulness is a place to start.



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A close-up photograph of two young women with long dark hair, laughing heartily and looking towards the camera. They are surrounded by other people in a crowd, though they are out of focus. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting an outdoor or well-lit indoor event.

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A high-angle photograph of three children sitting on a colorful, patterned rug. They are engaged in a learning activity, each with a worksheet on a clipboard. The child on the left is wearing a blue t-shirt and a black and white beanie, holding a blue marker. The child in the middle is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and a red and white striped beanie, holding an orange marker. The child on the right is wearing a red t-shirt and a red and white striped beanie, holding a yellow marker. The worksheets have text and lines for writing. The background shows a wooden floor and a blue rug.

Differentiation in Our Schools

RABBI YEHUDAH POTOK

Head of School, Striar Hebrew Academy,
Sharon, Massachusetts

Resisting Nostalgia: Differentiation in Multiage Classrooms

When I was a student way back in the 80s, my classroom consisted of rows of desks where we students would sit for eight hours a day listening to the teacher “instruct” us. As you can imagine, I had peers who struggled a lot. My classroom was riddled with “behavior problems,” kids who just didn’t understand the content, students who always did poorly on the tests and quizzes, and children who went home feeling mentally beat up every single day. Although at the time I enjoyed the stimulation of listening to the teachers and the predictability of raising my hand to respond, in hindsight I know it was not the most effective way for me to learn, and it certainly wasn’t a great way for my classmates to learn, either.

We know now that different children learn at different paces and in different ways. And yet, when you look at most classrooms in this country today, students are still often sitting in rows of desks, streamlined by birthdate and expected to absorb knowledge that the teachers pour into their heads. Why are our schools not keeping up with the latest research in the field of education and child development? Why are parents so eager to have their children learn in the exact same way that they did when they were kids? Why do adults (both parents and teachers) let nostalgia cloud our better judgment and our level of understanding?

I am now back in elementary school, and this time it is completely different. At Striar Hebrew Academy, we do things differently. We moved away from traditional frontal teaching and toward a center-based multiage education, where students are actively engaged in their learning and are expected to take ownership of their own studies as they engage in individual or small group work.

Teachers have time to work with smaller groups of students or individuals to target specific areas of learning and growth. This way each student moves forward at the appropriate pace for him or her. It’s a lot of work to differentiate, but it’s malpractice as an educator not to.

Research indicates that multiage classrooms have no real impact, positive or negative, on academic performance. Nevertheless, research does suggest that these environments have a positive impact on children’s social and emotional growth. As an elementary school, this is a large part of what we are teaching. At Striar we know that children need to learn to work together, to have difficult conversations, to advocate for themselves and others. We also know that strong social and emotional skills are in fact indicators of future professional success.

If you were to walk into our combined second/third grade class during language arts, this is what you would see. The children would be scattered around the room, some standing, others sitting or lying down, and a few kneeling at our communal tables. One small group would be with one of our teachers getting direct instruction. Some children would be on a computer working on an individual learning program, others would be in a small group working on a project they have been struggling with for a week. Our support teacher would be circulating around the room, conferencing with students who need a little extra guidance, and one child would be helping his friend edit a piece that he has been working on and is almost ready to be shared publicly. There are certainly no rows of desks. You would likely not be able to tell the difference between children in second grade and in third grade. Each student would be doing work appropriate for him or her, rather than assignments based on birthdate.

The irony is that this model isn’t even so new. There have always been classrooms that look like this, and there have always been teachers who have structured their students learning in this way. What we have now is plenty of research to support these practices. We have teachers who are all willing to leave their comfort zones in order to put the needs of children first. We have parents willing to abandon nostalgia to give their children the education that will equip them with the skills to evolve into creative, thoughtful and caring individuals.

As educators, we have a moral obligation to make sure that our pedagogic practices have the most effective impact so that our students succeed in their learning today and acquire the skills and dispositions to be successful lifelong learners.





Differentiation in Our Schools

REBECCA FRIEDMAN-CHARRY

JUDITH MAY

Judaic Studies Teachers,
Schechter School of Long Island,
Jericho, New York

Differentiation in Tanakh Classes: Integrating Students Who Transfer From Secular Schools

Like many schools, ours accepts some students who are beginning Jewish day school in middle or high school. How can we support these transfer students' integration into the Tanakh classroom?

We spent years experimenting with different models. Developing a separate track for transfer students didn't work. Isolated from their peers, the beginners lacked role models for engaging in traditional text study. On the other hand, early attempts at immediate mainstreaming led us to the opposite pitfall: Beginners were overwhelmed and felt they could never catch up. We found, then, that differentiating for these students affords them the best opportunities for success in Tanakh.

Some background: At SSLI, Tanakh classes are already heterogeneous. Students are accustomed to classmates with various levels of Hebrew knowledge, academic achievement and home observance. Tanakh teachers already create differentiated lesson plans and assessments. Mainstreaming with differentiation for transfer students makes sense in our school culture. We have found that transfer students can be mainstreamed successfully if teachers help them prepare and scaffold their learning.

Help them Prepare

When they enroll, students with no prior day school experience receive a list of the most essential Jewish studies information they should know before school begins in September. The list begins with the most basic skills, like being able to decode the Hebrew alphabet, and concludes with more "advanced" knowledge, like knowing the names of the Hebrew months. Students who are ready to develop a basic biblical Hebrew vocabulary are directed to the list of 52 most frequent words in Tanakh, as identified by Larry A. Mitchel (*A Student's Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic*). The intake team guides the family to identify which items on the list are a priority for the student

to prepare. A family member may help the student prepare, or a family may hire a tutor.

Once the school year begins, teachers give these students extra attention. In addition to diagnostic assessments and conversations, teachers speak twice as frequently with transfer students and their parents during the first month of classes to determine a course of action. Teachers continue to check in with each transfer student throughout the year and adjust the plan as needed.

Scaffold Material, and Gradually Wean from Scaffolding

Early in their studies, we try to pair transfer students with one another in havruta, so that when the rest of the class is working on translating a Bible passage from Hebrew, the beginners can use a translation. We tell them, though, that they will be responsible for recognizing some of the text in Hebrew. In the course of a unit, the class will focus on a number of key phrases. Before we quiz the class on those phrases, we meet with each transfer student to select which of the phrases they will have to recognize in Hebrew. At first, we may choose only two or three phrases. We gradually increase the number, continuing to involve the student in decisions of what will be formally assessed.

As transfer students become more comfortable in the school, we pair them with their more experienced peers. While this sometimes brings up concerns about Hebrew vocabulary, it exposes the new student to translation strategies. Most importantly, it teaches new students how to study in havruta.

What's the outcome? By the beginning of twelfth grade, transfer students are integrated into the Tanakh classroom. They study Hebrew text as frequently as their peers, with the same level of comprehension. Students are proud of having become full-fledged participants in their school's Jewish life.



LAUREN KOPPELMAN

Communications Manager,
The Rashi School, Dedham, Massachusetts

Math Differentiation Brings New Collaboration

The Rashi School recently designated a math specialist to mobilize teachers' collaboration around meeting students' diverse learning needs in mathematics. This specialist works in partnership with teachers to interpret and apply real-time data, assess student mastery, and identify opportunities for student development. Central to this collaboration between educators is ongoing reflection, information sharing, and goal-oriented adaptation of teaching approach based on documentation of each student's learning.

Background

The Rashi School's lower school classroom structure provides a learning space for 16-20 students per class section with a teaching team of two: one lead teacher and an assistant teacher. Each grade has two classes and, traditionally, each class's learning and instruction has largely been self-contained, although teachers meet weekly to collaborate on their instruction. As part of an initiative led by the school's director of curriculum and instruction and managed by the school's two

lower school learning specialists, Rashi's lower school teachers focused on redesigning math instruction in order to differentiate teaching and learning to appropriately challenge each student. This initiative combined both classes so teachers could group like-learners and deliver instruction to meet a variety of learning needs.

During the 2016-2017 school year, teachers in grades 2-5 partnered with a dedicated math specialist to collaborate on finding ways to meet students' diverse learning needs. For one hour per week, teachers devoted their planning time to this collaboration.

The Process

Each grade-level team met with the math learning specialist for an hour each week to assess their students' comprehension of concepts, to plan the upcoming week's lessons, and to consider methods for differentiating instruction for their class. Also available to our teachers was Paul Goldenberg, the author of ThinkMath, the math curriculum used at The Rashi School.



Differentiation in Our Schools

At the beginning of a unit, teachers pre-assessed their class to gain data points that helped them understand individual readiness to tackle each concept. Then, regardless of their homeroom, the teaching team organized the entire grade into smaller groups according to the students' readiness to receive new concepts, rather than requiring each teacher to focus on differentiating lessons for each type of learner in their class.

Based on research on attention spans in children (*Teaching in the Fast Lane* by Suzy Pepper Rollins), teachers separated lessons and supporting activities with movement breaks to solidify concepts and allow students to refresh their ability to focus on the lesson at hand. After a short frontal lesson in their homeroom, students would break into smaller groups to continue their math work with a lead teacher, an assistant teacher or the math learning specialist.

The following factors enabled the program to succeed:

- A clear understanding of expectations for each lesson
- Retaining students' attention, motivation, and retention during lessons thanks to the movement breaks
- More individualized attention for students
- The ability for teachers to plan and teach together, providing more dedicated time to think about and plan math instruction
- A spirit of collaboration between grade-level teams that spanned all curricular areas

These are areas of continued focus:

- Collaborating between teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of students who are not in their homerooms
- Exploring ways to find follow-up time with students who are in a different class
- Helping students better understand the concept of moving fluidly through different ability and understanding groupings throughout the year
- Finding balance between math and other curricular areas in their planning time

The Outcome

Data collected throughout the school year demonstrated that students were more likely to master concepts when they were empowered to explain to each other when and how they came to understand a new concept. The process led to teachers making more informed choices about when to employ whole-class, small-group and partner work in a variety of applications.

As a result of the work led by the math specialist, students received instruction from all of the teachers and interacted with students from the entire grade. Consequently, the students experienced different teaching styles and were able to work with and learn from peers from a greater pool. The math specialist directly supported students and their learning while also supporting teacher growth by helping build their capacity to meet the diverse needs of their students.





BRACHA DROR

Hebrew and Jewish Studies Teacher,
Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago

Techniques for Differentiation in Mixed-Grade Hebrew Classes

As a teacher in third and fourth grade mixed classes, I am conscious of the varied learning profiles of my students and how important it is to find ways to address their learning needs. At the beginning of the school year, I use a questionnaire based on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to determine the learning profile of each student (ow.ly/sP3630drlc8).

I meet with each student individually, checking letter and vowel recognition, listening to them reading a short passage and answering some comprehension questions. Based on the outcome of this assessment, along with learning profile information provided by the learning service team and knowledge based on performance in Hebrew in prior years, I create a folder for each student, organize relevant information and place kids in groups based on their level of basic reading/decoding and of comprehension.

My task then is to identify the best techniques to address the learners in my class. I set quarterly goals for students who struggle with reading and comprehension. The idea is to help them in small increments, to allow them to feel secure in class, and invite them to challenge themselves even though they might not always be successful. My ultimate goal for each child, and particularly with struggling students, is to celebrate their success. As small as the success may be, I serve as their cheerleader and help them recognize their progress.

At the end of each quarter, I review student folders, give them an additional reading challenge to see whether they have reached the quarter's goals, and adjust goals for the next quarter. I provide feedback, sharing information with students to encourage them.

Here are some of the differentiation techniques I use to reach all students.

- Stations. Start class with a mini-lesson of 10-15 minutes, to prep students for work in stations. Stations include review of vocabulary, practicing reading fluency, reading comprehension and review of material. The stations allow the teacher to work with individual students or small groups and to reach students who need support.
- Drama. Present stories and Torah texts and have students create plays. Students learn the text and write their own plays.
- Visual arts. Use pictures, paintings, drawings as "Midrash Temunah" (picture midrash) to help students express their understanding.
- Games. Games engage students deeply, helping them to reach understanding and review what is learned in class. A game can be an actual game (memory game, treasure hunt) or technology game (TinyTap, Kahoot).
- Conversation. Many times, the focus in the classroom is around reading and writing, and speaking is lost. By encouraging oral activities, students are able to use their language. One popular game we use is the spelling game Sparkle; we added a tweak: at the end of the spelling, the students need to say a sentence using the word they spelled. Other games include riddles, describe scenes/pictures, create sentences based on given vocabulary.

As an educator who values differentiation, I believe it is important for students to provide feedback to their teacher. At the end of each unit, I ask students to indicate what they liked and thought was worthwhile, and what wasn't as interesting or was too hard. Student feedback provides a deeper understanding through a student lens. It creates a system of "checks and balances," where the teacher is guided to make changes and address the crucial needs of every student.



Differentiation in Our Schools

RABBI MARSHALL LESACK

Chair, Judaic Studies Department

SHERA FREEDMAN

Learning Specialist

Claire and Emanuel G. Rosenblatt High School at
Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, Florida

Supporting Students from Eighth Grade to College

Our academic coaching program, established five years ago, was designed to provide support to graduates of our middle school who were transitioning to high school and committed to staying in our school, yet needed extra academic support during the high school years. The program has grown from a group of five students to more than 25 students on a part-time or full-time basis. As we have witnessed a growth in both interest and enrollment in this support program, we have continually reviewed our best practices, solicited feedback from our students and parents, and plotted a course forward so that we can graduate all types of learners who are ready for college upon graduation.

The program gives high school students, those who graduated from our middle school and those who joined our community just for high school, the tools and the support system to navigate the rigors of academic work on the high school level while providing them with a regular school day and access to the majority of our courses offered. An individual student plan (ISP) is designed for each student, and one of our two learning specialists is assigned to every student as well. This specialist pushes into the students' regular classes multiple times in a week and then works with students individually or in groups during a designated period of the day to review assignments, organize calendars and best support the students' needs. The specialist also serves as a bridge between the students in the program and school faculty, offering tips and teaching strategies to enable faculty to improve instruction for all types of learners.

The needs of each individual student in the program varies, and the learning specialist works with each student to strengthen their study and organization and executive functioning skills, while always delivering strategies to become an independent learner. Students enrolled in the program on a full-time basis meet with our learning specialists every day of the week and receive an elective class credit and a grade, which is then added to their transcript. As students move through their high school years, many who begin in the program will either be involved in it on a part-time basis or in no official capacity by the time they are in twelfth grade. In our opinion, this is a measure of the success of the program.

The academic coaching program has made a tremendous impact on our school community. It has enabled us to meet the needs of more learners, to keep our own students in our community and attract others to join us. Students are well prepared for college-level courses and better able to navigate their own educational journeys. Our teachers are growing as educators as they learn new skills and understand on a deeper level how to teach a multitude of learners. And our students, as full members of our school community in mainly regular or honors-level classes, are supported and mentored while going through high school without any stigma.



RABBI MOSHE ROSENBERG

Jewish Studies Teacher and
JudeoTech Integrator,
SAR Academy, Bronx, New York

Gaming for Prophets

JudgeQuest, a unique online gamified program, exploits the potential of gamification to provide a vehicle for effective differentiated learning in a Judaics classroom. JudgeQuest uses a flipped classroom and quest-based learning to empower students to learn Sefer Shoftim (the Book of Judges) almost entirely independently, at their own pace, and with greater depth and skills than are currently attained.

The backbone of JudgeQuest is a series of specially designed five-minute videos, containing every word of every verse, with no more than one verse per screen. A typical video is color-coded to show grammatical points and quotations, contains pictures and animations that tell the story, and has a healthy dose of humor. Embedded multiple-choice questions and a teacher dashboard help to keep track of students' progress, and the availability of Ivrit kalah (easy Hebrew) or English versions means that every student can access the videos on their level. Students view the videos as many times as they like and answer the questions until they earn the score set by the teacher for proficiency. They learn to regard each attempt as another step towards mastery and are delighted to hear that only the final score counts.

Links to the videos and the rest of the coursework are housed on **3DGameLab**, a Quest-based learning site that enables every assignment to earn XP (experience points) and supports the awarding of badges and leveling up. Quests can be as conventional or unconventional as the teacher wishes; the difference is in the labeling. "Fighting the Boss" can mean conquering a test on the entire chapter. I try to make many of the assignments fun by designing review games and creative activities. In the future, I plan

to include game design, as well, as one way of demonstrating mastery. The quests cover skills of reading, summarizing, making connections, grammar, parshanut and trope. It is up to the teacher to decide which quests are appropriate for which students. Stronger students can explore the trope and the grammar and can make connections to other texts, while weaker classmates may be doing the plot-related and reading quests.

By enabling the bulk of the learning to be done independently, JudgeQuest frees the teacher to work individually with kids, and allows teachers to differentiate based upon needs, to insert periodic frontal reviews, and to choreograph discussions in areas where we want to stretch the moral thinking of our students.

JudgeQuest thus engages more students and fosters active learning. It teaches more areas and skills. JudgeQuest makes differentiation natural and simple: Students proceed at their own pace, and teachers can tailor which quests are done by which students. JudgeQuest removes the stigma of failure and teaches students to take responsibility for their own learning. It can be adopted in toto or in part, as teacher, students and school prefer.

JudgeQuest is a work in progress. It was tested in incomplete forms since 2015 in the fifth grade of the SAR Academy, and, in 2016-17, at Manhattan Day School. Here are some things that I learned.

- The videos themselves are very popular, both among students and teachers. Some teachers use them to pre-teach, others use them to review or aid summarizing, while I use them for independent learning.
- The English version is necessary. My school

learns Ivrit B'Ivrit, but there are a few students in each class who still need the English.

- It is good that the program is modular. Teachers are reluctant to make the commitment to the gamified piece because of the learning curve, the novelty or personal teaching style. They nonetheless enthusiastically use the videos, with or without the embedded questions. The time to get buy-in is the summer, not the fall.
- It isn't necessary, or perhaps even desirable, to do every chapter with JudgeQuest. There will always be a couple of students who prefer to learn the traditional way. Teaching some chapters in a different, more traditional manner takes their preference into account and adds variety.
- Never underestimate the ability of students creatively to undermine your best efforts. Students' screens must be monitored to make sure that they are doing what they are supposed to do.
- It is wise to balance the independent time and the time spent in frontal review or discussion. Do not take for granted that answering the embedded questions guarantees knowing the content. Plan for as many ways of checking knowledge as you can.
- Some teachers found the videos saved them time, while some said they cost them time. This may have depended on how they were used in class and whether they were also assigned at home.

Despite the adjustment necessary for teachers used to traditional pedagogy, gamified learning can pay ample dividends by engaging students and helping them learn the material, especially in subjects such as Navi that are often allotted more limited classroom time than the primary subjects in Jewish studies.

**YOU KNOW
WHERE
YOUR
SCHOOL
IS NOW...**

A hand with a pinkish-red skin tone is pointing its index finger towards a map on a textured, light-colored surface. The map shows a coastline with red and blue markings. In the background, there are blurred circular lights in shades of yellow and white. The overall scene is brightly lit with a soft, warm glow.

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YOU KNOW
WHERE YOUR
SCHOOL IS
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RONA NOVICK
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“Mirror Mirror On The Wall”

Differentiated Instruction and the Fairness Challenge

Deeply ingrained attitudes and mindsets regarding fairness and equality may influence a teacher's decision to embrace or reject differentiated practices. Questions relating to student equality, relative distribution of support among students, and reasonable expectations of teachers may weigh on educators when considering implementation of differentiation. A powerful predictor of whether, how, how often and how successfully a teacher will differentiate his or her instruction is the teacher's mindset about fairness and justice within differentiation. That attitudes shape behavior is not a revolutionary idea. In terms of differentiation, however, certain deeply ingrained personal and societal ideas may either facilitate or hamper this critical pedagogic process. Few educators disagree with the notion that students benefit from personalized, tailored approaches. But mindsets regarding justice and fairness, which one would assume provide strong advocacy for differentiation, may create significant cognitive dissonance and result in a reluctance to engage in differentiated practice. We explore three ideas below, which, in isolation or together, contribute to mindsets that impede successful differentiation.

Idea 1: Democracy is an important ideal; treating some individuals or groups differently from others is unfair and undemocratic.

In the context of differentiation, the ideal of democracy may engender the sense that any way in which students within a group or class are treated differently is inherently unfair. Grass-roots and organized political and social movements have worked tirelessly to ensure equal access and equal rights for all. Such efforts have argued for, and often enabled, women, people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, and those with different abilities to receive equal rights under the law. The application of this democratic ideal in schools may result in the erroneous idea that allowing different opportunities for some students or adjusting the instruction or assessment they receive is unfair and runs counter to the principles of democracy. It is necessary to consider the democratic ideal with greater nuance to realize that providing all students with identical educational materials, procedures and assessments does not ensure the equality that is critical for true justice. Differentiation is not the antithesis of equal rights and access. In fact, given the diverse needs of learners, it would seem impossible to provide a fair educational experience by giving the same content and process to all. A parallel in medicine makes this point clear. We would consider it neither just nor advisable to offer chemotherapy to all patients, whether they have the flu or a sarcoma. Justice does demand that anyone with cancer, and everyone with the flu, regardless of social class, or financial means, should receive what they need to effect the best outcome. In the same way, each student needs access not to an identical learning prescription, but to an individualized “treatment” that will promote the best outcome.

Idea 2: Adding supports and resources for some students gives them an unfair advantage.

This attitude was seen in our own research on online discussion posts in a course on supporting diverse learners. A common concern among teachers is that giving select students easier work, while imposing greater demands on others, is simply unfair.

Revisiting a school's educational mission is a critical first step in addressing this concern. Expressed therein should be a commitment to the belief that the job of educators is to help all students learn and grow. After setting educational standards and goals, the main task is to assist students in reaching or exceeding them. With a commitment to growth and to actualization of individual potential comes the natural understanding that different students will need different avenues to get there. This extends not only to the added supports and resources that would benefit the learning of the weaker students but also to the enrichment and extension opportunities that would support the growth and advancement of the academically gifted students. A culture of growth and learning also means that typical learners never receive "busywork" so as to allow time to work with struggling students, and that struggling students never receive busywork to keep them occupied and get them through the day.

There is a prevailing mindset that differentiation offers an easy way out—perhaps a "cop out"—for students who struggle with the traditional curriculum, when in fact the opposite is true. In his book *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, Rick Wormeli illustrates this misunderstanding through the example of a near-sighted student sitting in the back of the classroom. Imagine removing this student's eyeglasses in order to make it fair to the students who don't wear glasses. Denying him his eyeglasses is not leveling the playing field; it is actually giving the student an "out," because then he can excuse himself from learning because of not being able to see the board. The eyeglasses are the support that allows him to engage in, and be optimally challenged by, the task at hand. Supports provided in a differentiated classroom assure that students cannot "cop out" of the learning experience and simply choose to fail. A differentiated classroom assures that all students are challenged in accordance with their needs so that their learning is stretched as much as possible and they are held to high academic expectations.

Possibly the greatest concern surrounding unfair advantages for struggling students relates to issues of grading. How can students who were provided with different learning activities, additional time or alternate assessments be graded using the same system of reporting as their peers who didn't have the benefit of these modifications? How can transparency be maintained when the same grade may be reflective of drastically different levels of support and accommodations?

In considering fair and honest systems of grading, reports on students' academic achievements should always extend beyond the traditional grade. Anecdotal reports, descriptive notes and ongoing progress reports are communication opportunities that could clearly convey individual students' goals, pathways to reach the goals and attainment of them. A balance between honest and transparent reporting on students' academic achievements and shortcomings, coupled with written reports that provide broader information on the students' progress and development, has the potential to offer clear and important feedback while motivating learning and propelling all students to grow.

Additionally, differentiation specialist Carol Ann Tomlinson points out that grading and differentiation are not as incompatible as one might

think. If the goal of summative assessment is demonstration of mastery of the criteria, as suggested by educational researchers, then the pathway that was adopted to attain the mastery is far less significant than whether or not mastery was attained. Stated differently, if a student needs to hear material explained three more times than his or her peers, or if a student can only articulate certain concepts orally rather than in writing, the learning process and the medium of expression are quite secondary to the fact that the student attained mastery of the target learning goals. Using clear learning objectives as a yardstick for grading, teachers can consider numerous pathways for students to demonstrate mastery of the criteria, without compromising the integrity of the grading or reporting system.

Idea 3: Differentiation is extra work for teachers, and it is unfair to place this burden on them.

Differentiated instruction requires considerable preparation and access to or creation of a wide variety of materials. Jewish day school teachers are tasked with a significant workload, and are often not compensated for sufficient preparatory time during their work day. In addition, whereas secular subject teachers may have access to published materials that are differentiated, or various versions of material, Judaic studies teachers are generally required to create their own materials. Teachers and administrators who accept the idea that differentiation will place additional demands on teachers may dismiss differentiation as unfair. This places what is fair and just for students in competition with what is fair and just for teachers.

It is important to challenge the accuracy of this view. When diverse students struggle in non-differentiated classrooms, teachers are burdened with addressing the resulting behavior issues and with contacting parents extensively to grapple with learning issues. Differentiating instruction is actually a wise investment, front-loading time and effort to smooth the way for productive and efficient class time in the long run. Differentiation is meant to impact the way teachers think, so that they are not planning longer, but planning differently. It allows a shift of emphasis to what students are learning, rather than what the teacher is teaching, and enables teachers to explore how differentiation can serve as important solutions to real struggles.

Additionally, teachers should receive the explicit message that just as each student is an individual on his or her own path to growth and accomplishment, each teacher is a unique individual on a personal journey to maximizing student growth and accomplishment. Incorporating differentiation into one's teaching is not an all-or-nothing endeavor. It need not entail a total reworking of all a teacher currently does, nor an intense commitment of time and effort. Moving from the idea that it is too difficult, takes too much time, and is unfair to teachers, to accepting the professional responsibility to grow and to meet the needs of all students, may support small, meaningful steps towards differentiation.

Deeply ingrained attitudes and mindsets regarding fairness and equality may influence a teacher's decision to embrace or reject differentiated practices. Questions relating to student equality, relative distribution of support among students, and reasonable expectations of teachers may weigh on educators when considering implementation of differentiation. A differentiated mindset does not readily challenge the widely accepted notions of fairness. In fact, when considering the many different opportunities offered by differentiation to empower and advance all students, a classroom that supports differentiation may actually be "the fairest of them all."



THE BOARD'S ROLES IN RAISING DONORS

My board doesn't want to fundraise, and the responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of my head of school, development director and development chair. How can I work with my board so fundraising becomes more of a team effort?

When board members say they don't want to fundraise, they're usually referring to the actual "ask." It's safe to say that a majority of people do not like to ask for money. They may feel uncomfortable about asking others for money, upset about anticipated rejection, or worried about annoying friends and colleagues.

If we want our board members to be active and engaged fundraisers, we need to approach fundraising from a new perspective. Fundraising is not asking strangers or begging friends for donations. In fact, fundraising is not about raising money at all! Rather, the crucial role fundraising plays in your school is to raise donors. Raising money year after year is the result of developing a base of loyal support, people committed to your school's mission and vision and eager to support the crucial work you do.

Imagine you've convinced the board to see fundraising as raising donors. Excellent. Many board members may still tell you they don't want to actually ask for money. I hear that. Not every board member has to make the ask. Nevertheless, every board member has crucial roles to play in the process of raising donors for your school.

At this point, reach out to board members separately and help them determine how best to participate in your fundraising program based on their strengths and interests. Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions—offer a menu for involvement. Your board members will be more motivated when you take the time at the outset to design an engagement plan that suits them.

There are many approaches and roles you can share with your board. Do they have a robust network of friends and colleagues? They can serve as door openers. They're simply connecting the people and organizations with whom they have previous relationships to your school. They can provide names of friends or colleagues for a tour, introduce your head of school to a personal contact at a foundation, or host a house party or social at their home where the head or other staff can speak about the school's work and impact.

The next level in raising donors lies in holding conversations and facilitating deeper engagement. Board members can serve as

greeters or hosts of school tours, take part in events where they talk with guests about your school, pay for a guest to attend an event (golf tournament or gala), or invite people to a Torah study with the head of school.

Board members can convey the school's value to others. At an event, they can give a personal testimony about why they support your school and the impact your school has had on their family or community. They can put that testimony in writing, providing support for your head of school or other team member while making a solicitation. Board members can attend cultivation meetings with your head of school, development director or other board members.

There are other methods of solicitation that your board members can explore. They can ask their company to participate in a special project or volunteer experience with your school, or to offer to make a donation match. They can approach places where they do business and ask for a contribution or in-kind donations.

One of the most important and meaningful roles every board member should play, by far, is that of a thanker. Every donation made to your school, whether \$18 or \$18 million, deserves thanks and appreciation. Board members can sign thank-you cards, send handwritten thank-you notes on personal stationery, or pick up the phone and thank someone for supporting your school. A little bit of gratitude goes a very long way.

The most important message to convey to your board members is that they play a crucial role in your school's development program. They can be as close to or as far from the actual solicitation as they want while still having a big impact on your school. Invest in finding the right fit for each of your board members in this work, and you'll see a shift in their perception of fundraising.

Have a question about day schools that you'd like answered?
Submit it to advice@prizmah.org.

NINA PRICE
DEBORAH SKOLNICK EINHORN

Finding Strengths in Classroom Neurodiversity

In all classrooms, teachers encounter diverse students with individual strengths and challenges. Typically, teachers celebrate student successes and feel frustration with students who find learning to be challenging or exhibit disruptive behaviors. This reaction is, in part, a relic of the behaviorist approach to education of the 20th century and further supported by an education system that praises teachers who minimize behavioral disruptions and produce high test scores in their classrooms (Mary Brownell et al., “Special Education Teacher Quality and Preparation”). In some states, teacher pay raises are even dependent on such standardized measures, placing additional pressures on teachers. While Jewish day schools are not beholden to these means of assessment, their teachers still operate in a society in which they feel judged by the performance of their students and consequently seek ways to isolate and “fix” problematic behavior.

This tendency toward frustration, judgment and an insistence on “bringing students in line” is aligned with a medical model of addressing special needs that emphasizes the identification of deficiencies and pathologizes difference. This approach of regarding academic diversity as deficit rather than difference continues to be the primary manner in which it is taught in professional preparatory programs and is enshrined in the current practice of defining eligibility for special education services based on fixed categories (Sarah Triano, “Categorical Eligibility for Special Education”). In contrast with this medical model, more recent research in the fields of education and brain science have introduced an alternate approach for understanding and working with students who have special needs, one that is centered upon the concept of neurodiversity.

At its core, neurodiversity is an approach to understanding the diversity within our learners in the context of an ecological model that celebrates the value of biodiversity and recognizes that all organisms optimally thrive in an environment that highlights their strengths and supports their weaknesses. Neurodiversity recognizes that all brains exist along a continuum of competence, and that one’s ability is often defined by the context in which one lives. With regard to education, Thomas Armstrong describes the idea of neurodiversity as a “paradigm shift” in terms of how we address learners who have special needs. It is our assertion that the field of Jewish education is fertile ground for such a shift in how it works with students often described as “low,” “troublemakers” or “challenged,” because this approach improves outcomes for students and families while aligning with ethical norms and building community.

In Jewish schools, we teach students about the value of betzelem Elohim and introduce texts such as Sanhedrin 4:5 that speak to the uniqueness of each individual and recognize that each person represents an entire world. At the same time, many Jewish day schools fail to provide neurodiverse learners with an educational environment in which they can thrive. Without the legal mandate required of public schools to support IEPs, some Jewish day schools counsel students with special needs out of their schools. Nationally, there are organizations such as Matan and Gateways that are working to provide wraparound services to day schools to meet the needs of neurodiverse students. While this is a great starting point for promoting inclusion, we believe that educating teachers in the principles of neurodiversity has the potential to bring about a fuller implementation of inclusion, both programmatic and attitudinal, in our community's Jewish schools. By training teachers in a strengths-based approach toward differentiation that is grounded in the concept of neurodiversity, Jewish educational institutions can help teachers effect a paradigm shift in how they regard and work with learners who have special needs.

If, as a community, we are committed to supporting an educational approach that promotes inclusion and positively regards student competence along a continuum, then we must be ready to make an investment in training educators to implement strengths-based teaching strategies that are grounded in the principles of neurodiversity. During the process of redesigning the Hebrew College Jewish Special Education Program through this lens, we uncovered four core educational elements: the importance of guided student reflection upon their own attitudes toward disabilities; the value of both wrestling with and embracing Jewish texts as part of the learning process; taking a holistic approach to understanding disabilities and exceptionalities and how they describe observed traits as well as influence identities; and providing concrete skills that will enable teachers to construct positive learning environments.

As noted earlier, it is common for teachers to use negative adjectives to describe students that may not fit academically or behaviorally in the current structure of their classroom. We have found that teachers may not be aware of the biases reflected in such vocabulary and how the way they speak about their students is part of a broader societal trend to pathologize difference, even to the extent of regarding brain differences as “kidnapping” children who would have otherwise been happy and productive (Joseph F. Kras, “The ‘Ransom Notes’ Affair”). Providing teachers with guided opportunities to reflect upon their attitudes and the experiences that have impacted their understanding of disability renders them better prepared to adopt the principles of neurodiversity. Teachers are also more open to recognizing how their classroom structure or pedagogic practices may be unintentionally exacerbating students’ challenges by focusing solely on remediating deficits rather than also drawing upon students’ strengths.

We have further found that Jewish texts can be a useful tool in supporting the process of self-reflection and exploration of personal and communal biases. When teachers wrestle with a text from Vayikra 21 that discusses the exclusion from priestly service of anyone who has a perceived *mum*, defect, they must

recognize the entrenchment of bias regarding disability, even reaching back to biblical times. In contrast, when they explore a talmudic passage from Horayot 3:5 at the beginning of a unit focused on learning disabilities and read about a tradition that Moshe was on Sinai for 40 days because he repeatedly learned and then forgot the Torah but was finally given Torah as a gift, there is an opportunity to recognize the value Judaism places upon making learning accessible for everyone.

While providing teachers with general knowledge regarding a wide range of neurodiverse profiles in order to help them understand IEPs, evaluation reports and their students, we also make certain that our teachers understand that each student is unique and an entire world unto him- or herself. In order to help teachers more holistically understand their students, we encourage building lines of communication with families and recognizing that the Jewish community must also support the family members of neurodiverse individuals. We include coursework that addresses the social and emotional needs of neurodiverse learners. Exposure to SEL (social and emotional learning) principles and PBIS (positive behavior interventions and supports) frameworks, and a recognition that behavior is a key to understanding the minds of our students, are crucial concepts we believe should be included in teacher training.

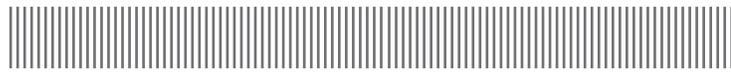
The processes of reflecting, wrestling and expanding core knowledge prepares teachers to engage in positive niche construction, one of the core principles of neurodiversity. Thomas Armstrong (*Neurodiversity in the Classroom*) defines positive niche construction as “the establishment of a favorable environment within which a student with special needs can flourish in school.” Armstrong’s model of positive niche construction encompasses seven key components: strengths awareness, positive role models, assistive technologies/universal design for the learning (UDL), strength-based learning strategies, human resources, positive career aspirations and environmental modifications. This approach builds upon an ecological model of understanding the world in which the learning environment is regarded as a complex system that needs to be addressed holistically in order to support all learners.

In school settings there is often a rush to make minor environmental modifications, such as providing a student with a fidget spinner, and then feeling that the student’s needs have been appropriately met. Armstrong’s comprehensive approach to positive niche construction challenges teachers to start off by recognizing their students’ strengths. As he notes, “If our only knowledge about students with special needs is limited to the negatives in their lives—low test scores, low grades, negative behavior reports and deficit-oriented diagnostic labels—then our ability to differentiate learning effectively is significantly restricted.” When Jewish schools try to decide whether a student with special needs is a good fit for their school, they may be skipping this crucial first step of strengths awareness.

Next, appropriate adjustments can be made to pedagogic practices that build upon students’ strengths and enable them to grow academically and build confidence. Exposing students to positive role models of successful individuals, including athletes, actors, entrepreneurs and Jewish leaders, both in the Tanakh and today, who found ways to optimize their

strengths and learn from the challenges of their disabilities is another way to build students' self-esteem. Such exposure can also help them develop a mindset that is open to learning and motivate them to work toward potential positive career aspirations. Once teachers recognize the uniqueness of each neurodiverse learner, they are ready to implement strengths-based learning strategies and provide the appropriate human resources and assistive technologies to optimally support each student. When all of these pieces are in place, then environmental modifications can successfully be implemented in a manner that respects students and creates an environment in which they can optimally learn in a way that meets sensory, academic and emotional needs.

Even if schools do not have funds to significantly change staffing ratios or redesign classrooms, the attitudinal changes and the shift toward strengths-based learning can be implemented by teachers without significant financial investment beyond professional development. Teachers we have worked with at Hebrew College and parents of students in their classrooms have reported that even minor changes resulting from exposure to the idea of neurodiversity can significantly improve student classroom experiences. Investing in teachers' understanding of neurodiversity has anecdotally been demonstrated to be an effective way to promote inclusion in Jewish learning settings. Professional development that promotes neurodiversity, engages teachers in meaningful reflection, and grounds the practice of meeting individual learners' needs in Jewish values has the potential to transform schools, families and communities.



To Learn More

Thomas Armstrong, *Neurodiversity: Discovering the Extraordinary Gifts of Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Other Brain Differences*

Thomas Armstrong, *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life*

www.allkindsofminds.org

disabilitiesinclusion.org/additional-resources/

www.jfunders.org/disability-rights

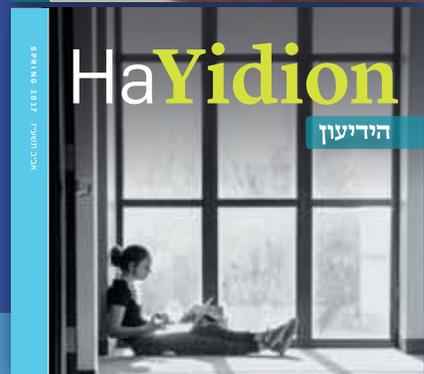
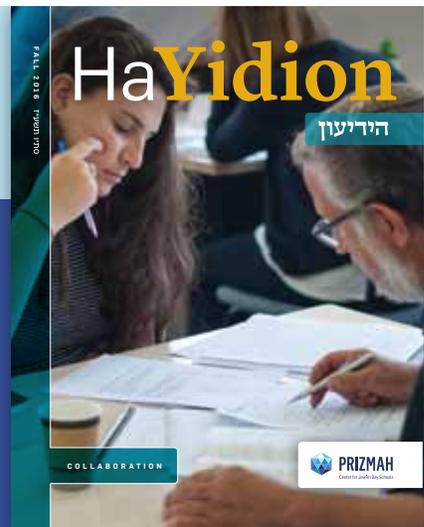
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**DIFFERENTIATION
OUT OF CLASS**



**LISA EXLER
BRYNA LEIDER**



Differentiation

The Key to Unlocking the Joy of Torah Study for All Students

In January, the third grader's struggles with Chumash became almost unmanageable. He alternated between resting his head on his closed book, doodling in it and making jokes that disrupted his class at Beit Rabban Day School in New York City. When a teacher worked with him one-on-one and asked him to read a pasuk aloud, he responded, "I can't. I hate Chumash." Indeed, when he eventually opened his Chumash and started to read, he mispronounced many words. The only time he engaged productively was when he enthusiastically argued his point during discussions about ethical questions in the text.



Fast forward to early June. The aforementioned third grader (we'll call him Shai) and two of his classmates are working on an activity to reinforce possessive endings. They choose a card from a pile and complete a chart that asks them to copy the word, separate it into the noun and the possessive ending and translate the word. Shai helps his classmates when they have trouble figuring out some of the endings. When asked to reflect on second half of his year in Chumash, Shai says, "I grew a lot! I can read better now, and I can translate better. Next year I want to get better at translating. I used to not like Chumash, but now I do."

What changed between January and June? Differentiation.

Beit Rabban's vision in Chumash is that all students will effectively engage with the text in its original language, such that they can understand the text, construct their own interpretation of it, connect emotionally to it and develop a love of Torah study. In January, many students were not achieving this vision. So in the latter part of the year, the Chumash teachers at Beit Rabban Day School participated in The Jewish Education Project's Tiny School initiative, in which schools test out a future educational vision on a small scale. The project was based, with permission, on 4.0 Schools' Tiny Fellowship. Only when teachers began to differentiate instruction in Chumash classes, which they learned through the Tiny School initiative, did Beit Rabban begin to achieve its goals in Chumash.

The Program of Professional Development

Allison Cook and Orit Kent posit that changes to text-based instruction, and other educational change work, emerge from progress in three domains: stance (attitudes and beliefs), pedagogical structures and core practices ("Havruta Inspired Pedagogy: Fostering An Ecology of Learning for Closely Studying Texts with Others"). In the context of our initiative, stance was the teachers' attitudes and beliefs about differentiation. For the professional development to succeed, teachers needed to believe that students would be more successful if Chumash was taught in a differentiated way. Teachers also

had to learn the pedagogical structures—how to organize the time and space in the classroom—that allow for differentiation. Finally, teachers needed to be familiar with the core competencies and skills that Chumash learners use and the techniques that help them become increasingly adept.

The second through fifth grade Chumash teachers at Beit Rabban met for three full-day sessions and two half-day sessions over a period of five months. During the first session, teachers identified goals for teaching Chumash. Prior to the Tiny School initiative, Beit Rabban and Mechon Hadar had partnered to create Standards for Fluency in Jewish Text and Practice. Teachers used these benchmarks to determine differentiated goals for classes and students based on where Chumash classes were meeting expectations and where they were not. Teachers chose to focus on the goals of building students' abilities to engage in close reading, while also maintaining a commitment to engaging with large sections of content.

The content of the professional development sessions focused primarily on the domain of structure, followed by core competencies. Structure was particularly important because Chumash classes at Beit Rabban had previously been conducted primarily in whole-class discussion format, in service of a vision of Torah study as a communal enterprise. We found that this structure often encouraged the participation of a few enthusiastic students rather than the engagement of everyone. Professional development sessions therefore featured modeling of different pedagogical structures (described below) and core practices as well as discussion and co-planning. We chose to weave discussions related to stance throughout the learning for teachers. In between sessions, teachers experimented with the new structures and core practices and were observed at least twice. Sessions also included time for teachers to reflect on their experiments, share successes and problem-solve around challenges.

The design of this professional development initiative also took into account the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education's directives for the design of effective learning—defined as that which results in changes in teacher practice and gains in student outcomes. By incorporating these recommendations that professional development be ongoing,

connected, specific, concrete, collaborative, active and reflective, we ensured that not only were teachers learning, but that they were applying their learning and experimenting with new techniques in their classrooms, resulting in real changes in student learning.

What Did The Changed Classrooms Look Like?

We began with a station rotation, which is employed in blended learning. In this model, three or four groups engage in simultaneous activities and rotate after a specific period of time. While not ideal for differentiation because this model does not allow for differences in pacing and limits student choice, station rotation can feel like a more manageable first step. Next, we moved to an adaptation of Montessori work time in which students receive a list of tasks they must accomplish. In this system, students choose their preferred sequence of activities and level of challenge, work at a pace that is right for them, engage actively with material, and receive more individualized attention from the teacher.

The teachers at Beit Rabban experimented with a series of variations on these structures. Some teachers opened every Chumash class with a whole group meeting that included a brief discussion or activity relevant to everyone and/or a review of the day's activities, to support greater independence later. Other teachers chose to have students move directly into the day's activities, but begin working with a small group of students who might require more direction or support. Over a 40-minute Chumash period, students were typically asked to engage in three or four activities. One of those activities was a small group lesson with a teacher every day or every other day and/or a one-on-one student conference.

To ensure that the multiple skills students need to acquire for text proficiency were accounted for, we identified categories of Chumash learning. Teachers planned activities such that all of these categories would be represented over the course of a week. The categories included vocabulary, grammatical/textual features, translation, reading fluency, comprehension of content, critical thinking/interpretation and personal meaning-making.

In one example, the activities in a third grade Chumash class included a vocabulary game, a listening center where students practiced the Torah trope and translation of five pesukim using iPads, and a worksheet where students wrote summaries of the five pesukim. Students with stronger reading fluency and translation skills were asked to write the summaries before going to the listening center; students who needed more support did the opposite. The vocabulary game included a self-correcting component so that students could play at their individual levels. The fourth activity was a small-group lesson with a teacher, in which students worked on comprehension of content and critical thinking. However, in one group students spent time chunking words, while in another students explored phrases in the same pesukim that also appear elsewhere in Tanakh.

The more teachers structured their classes along these models, the more students' text skills improved. Their attitudes towards learning Chumash improved as well. In the

differentiated Chumash classroom, students went from feeling bored, either because the class felt too difficult or too easy, to feeling engaged and successful.

Differentiation: The Key to Unlock the Torah

In January, desperate to save Shai's relationship with Torah study, we were about to give up on the possibility of him working with the text in its original language. We seriously considered giving him the text in English so that he could continue to participate in the discussions about the ethical questions in the text without having to struggle through the reading and translating tasks that challenged him. We thought that this choice would help improve his attitude towards Chumash. In reality, this choice would have consigned him to a relationship with the Torah that would always be dependent on and mediated by others' translations and interpretations. Instead, thanks to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, he and his schoolmates have the ability, confidence and desire to engage with the text directly, to construct their own understanding and interpretation of it and relate to Torah as a source of wisdom for their own lives.

We did not change the text that we put in front of students. Students continued to learn the text in its original language. We changed what we asked students to do, and this improved their skills, and built their motivation, excitement and joy in text study.

This change wasn't quick or easy, and it is still very much in process. It required releasing teachers from the classroom and investing in their learning; it required teachers to spend extra time planning and developing new materials; it required teachers to take risks with new approaches that sometimes fail and to be willing to share these failures with colleagues so that everyone could learn; it required students to adjust to new classroom structures and to take more responsibility for their learning. But as we learned through the partnership between Beit Rabban and The Jewish Education Project, differentiation can happen and must happen in Jewish text classes. In fact, it is likely the only way to ensure that every student can truly claim their birthright of Torah.



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RESHET ROUNDUP

A NETWORKED AND NETWORKING CULTURE

DEBRA SHAFFER SEEMAN

Prizmah's Network Weaver

There's a subtle and deeply impactful shift afoot at Prizmah: Our team is beginning to approach all our work as network weavers and connectors. We're looking beneath the hood of every one of Prizmah's offerings to the field of Jewish day schools, and considering each of them with an eye towards networked learning. As impactful as our gatherings have been to date, our Prizmah team is pushing beyond by envisioning the ways that networked learning can raise our effectiveness to the next level. With this in mind, allow me to share some of the shifts that are taking place in our work at Prizmah.

Networked learning, simply put, helps us to develop and sustain connections (networks) between and among Jewish day school leaders so that we can support one another's growth (learning) as leaders in the field. It's a model that favors decentralized activities organized and run by network members, rather than depending on a central "hub" as the initiator of activity. Networked learning privileges the sharing of tried-and-true lessons by leaders in the field, using strategies like community-wide conversations, virtual round tables, and crowdsourced responses to thorny challenges. With Prizmah's support, field leaders take center stage in setting the network's agenda and carrying it out. This philosophy of practice allows Prizmah to be nimble and responsive to the needs and requests of leaders in the field.

In our inaugural year, Prizmah launched 20 Reshet groups, which continue to function as sub-networks within our larger network of North American Jewish day schools. These Reshet groups operationalize the mindset of networked learning. Each serving a different sub-network of the field, the group members connect, for example, through book clubs, action-oriented working groups, peer-to-peer mentorships, online listserv conversations, webinars, interactive digital resource libraries, and in-person gatherings. During our second year, this significant investment in networked learning at Prizmah is now expanding beyond the Reshet portfolio and impacting our in-person and virtual convenings.

Practically speaking, spreading networked learning into more of our work requires a mindset which might be described as follows: "Given Prizmah's unique vantage point, how are we going to learn from and with our partners in the field in order to support the learning and growth of day school leaders?" In short, how can we all grow together?

In our efforts to embrace this networked-learning mindset, Prizmah leaders have changed a number of aspects of our in-person and virtual convenings. New features include:

- More time for small-group learning
- Peer-to-peer connection
- Questions shared with people beyond the convenings, and responses crowdsourced
- Ongoing learning after convenings
- Reflective blogging during and after events
- Roundtables featuring the work and experiences of leaders from the field

In making this shift towards a networked-learning mindset, one of our goals is to model the commitment to learning and growth that is at the heart of Prizmah's ethos. We're experimenting with new teaching and learning models, trying new approaches to adult education, and investing in our own development. We know that we won't always get this right, and that the missteps along the way serve as encouragement that we're actively engaged in a learning process. You're the key to knowing how far we've come.

Let me know how we're doing by reaching out to me at debras@prizmah.org. My "virtual door" is always open.



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MEET PRIZMAH'S STAFF

One of Prizmah's greatest assets is its incredibly talented and dedicated staff. Prizmah is proud of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of our staff members and the new talent that we are constantly adding to our team. Here are a few new hires who joined us over the summer. Get to know our full team by visiting www.prizmah.org/our-team/staff.

Elissa Maier

Chief Operating Officer

elissam@prizmah.org | 646-975-2818



Elissa spent many years in the Federation system, most recently serving as the vice president of both the financial resource development and the Mandel Center for Leadership Excellence at JFNA. Elissa's expertise in the areas of effective communication skills, leadership development and management skills have enabled her to serve as a resource to develop and facilitate programs to advance the skills of volunteer and professional leaders. Elissa is the past president of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, where her daughters attended elementary and middle school. They both graduated from Golda Och Academy, where they attended high school. Elissa has a master's in social work from Yeshiva University and a bachelor's from the University of Miami.

Jeffrey Savit

Chief Development Officer

jeffreys@prizmah.org | 646-975-2805



Jeffrey served most recently as president and CEO of the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island (Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Center) and the Jewish Federation Foundation of Rhode Island, where he has served for the last six years. Jeffrey has a background as an attorney, and also worked as a social work director for an agency serving Jewish seniors. Jeffrey also brings extensive experience as a lay leader, having served as the board chair of Jewish Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Greater Boston, and the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston, two of Boston's larger Jewish agencies. He and his wife Lori Barnet are the proud parents of two daughters who attended the former South Area Solomon Schechter Day School, the Rashi School and Gann Academy.

Rabbi Yechiel Shaffer

Yeshiva Day School Advocate

yechiels@prizmah.org | 646-975-2829



A native of London, Yechiel now resides in Baltimore. Graduating from Yeshiva University with a master's in Jewish education and a rabbinic degree, Yechiel has worked for a number of Jewish institutions, including Congregation Ohab Zedek of the Upper West Side as the assistant rabbi, the YU School Partnership as the assistant director of development, and currently as the rabbi of the Pikesville Jewish Congregation. Yechiel's primary passion is studying current best practices in education and leadership, and working hard to help integrate these practices in the Jewish community. He looks forward to working closely supporting the Yeshiva day school community.

Erin Tasmin

Financial Controller

erint@prizmah.org | 646-975-2837



Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, Erin received her bachelor's degree in international business at Rhodes College, in Memphis, Tennessee, and her master's in accountancy from The University of Virginia. Prior to joining Prizmah, Erin worked in public accounting for Ernst & Young, as the senior director of finance for the Rheumatology Research Foundation and American College of Rheumatology, and most recently as the controller for The Juilliard School, in Manhattan. In her personal time, Erin enjoys exploring this amazing city with her partner, Steven, and her beloved dog, Dobe, cooking lots of healthy food, and reading. Erin is thrilled for the opportunity to enhance the financial infrastructure of Prizmah.

Daniel Weinberg

Schechter School Advocate and Partnerships Manager

danielw@prizmah.org | 646-975-2819



Daniel serves two roles at Prizmah: advocate supporting Solomon Schechter day schools, and manager of strategic partnerships with other organizations. Daniel has served as an administrator at Solomon Schechter Day School of Chicago, taught in a public school and worked at Ramah Day Camp. He prides himself as having led programs in Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform and unaffiliated organizations. He has a bachelor's from National-Louis University, a master's in education from Loyola University, and a Certificate of Jewish Day School and Yeshiva Leadership from JELI. He recently completed the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute and is certified as a trainer for the ADL A World of Difference Institute. Daniel lives with his wife and three children in Skokie.

JEFF LIBERTY

Getting off the Blocks

Low-Barrier Entry Points for Personalized Learning Novices

Most teachers have had some experience with and training about differentiated instruction in the course of their careers. Recent developments in learning software design on the one hand and brain science on the other have shifted the conversation about meeting students' needs away from differentiation per se and towards the concept of "personalized learning" (PL). While there are many definitions of PL, all refer to a suite of tools, strategies, approaches, mindsets and structures that educators employ to facilitate greater student ownership and developmentally appropriate control of their learning. In other words, personalized learning intends to take differentiated instruction to its fullest possible extent: focusing on the needs and opportunities of individual students as opposed to groups of students with common learning needs and interests.

While the shift from differentiation to personalization seems like a reasonable enough commitment to make philosophically, the technical and adaptive shifts required of teachers can be daunting. In contrast with differentiated instruction, very few teachers experienced learning in personalized learning models in their own education, and a small fraction of active teachers was trained to facilitate student learning in this way. As a result, there are many "PL novices" in schools all over the world who will require substantial coaching and retraining in order to take full advantage of the dynamic promise of personalized learning.

Over the last three school years, BetterLesson has worked closely with hundreds of teachers to shift their practice in the direction of PL, including more than 400 teachers from Jewish day schools in the United States and Canada, thanks to the generous support of The AVI CHAI Foundation. Over that time, we have observed that most of the challenges that PL novices face in shifting their practice can be broken into four main interrelated categories:

- planning and instructional design
- managing the emotions associated with doing something dramatically different
- developing specific technical skills required to be successful in a PL environment
- overcoming resistance to changing past practice

Our coaching team has identified the following strategies and low-barrier entry points that work well in helping PL novices to overcome these challenges.

Planning and Design

Setting a small number of broad goals for students, trying many different strategies connected to those goals, and breaking teachers' broad vision for student success into smaller steps to get there are useful strategies for dealing with the challenges related to the planning and design of student personalization. Fortunately, all of these approaches to supporting PL novices are connected to the concepts of "chunking" and "scaffolding" that most teachers will be familiar with as a result of their having made various attempts at differentiating learning for their students.

For example, many teachers we support have a broad vision that includes a desire to cultivate in their students "a passionate love of math and problem-solving" and "a fearless attitude towards learning and failing." But how does one teach and model passion and fearlessness? To answer that question, our coaches probe the underlying trends within each teacher's classroom and the obstacles that might prevent individual students from developing these dispositions and mindsets. The result is a narrowing and sequencing process that makes a grand vision more actionable and achievable. In one case, our coaches encouraged the teacher to focus on three areas of her practice:

- developing systems for addressing the needs of organizationally challenged students
- supporting students to work effectively and productively in collaborative groups
- using formative data to inform student tasks and drive instruction

Once the teacher saw a connection between these focus areas and her larger vision for student success, she was eager to hear our coaches' recommendations about specific strategies that would address each area of focus. This explicit chunking of the instructional design and planning processes strengthens the skills of each teacher and simultaneously gives teachers a concrete experience of personalized professional learning that they can apply to personalizing the learning of their students.

Emotional Challenges

In the early stages of implementing PL strategies, there is generally anxiety and uncertainty about what the results will be. Some teachers, especially those lacking fluency with educational technology, may fear losing control of their classes if they experiment with new modalities of learning. Some may not know how to implement technological strategies in their classrooms or may have experienced setbacks in their previous attempts to use technology, and are therefore naturally reluctant. Even experienced teachers may feel uncomfortable changing major components of their students' experience without having evidence of the efficacy of doing so. For example, some experienced educators don't initially see the benefits of increasing student voice and letting go of control, because these approaches to learning and teaching are outside of their experience, both as educators and as learners.

Our coaches have learned that telling stories about other teachers' successes and failures in implementing personalization strategies can make it easier for PL novice teachers to overcome some of the emotional challenges that are a result of

making (or even contemplating) a paradigmatic shift in their practice. Highlighting and honoring what experienced teachers already know and do well and demonstrating how important those skills are in highly effective personalized learning environments can make it easier for veteran educators to begin the journey towards higher degrees of student personalization.

For teachers who have a specific fear of or aversion to introducing educational technology into their classrooms, it can be helpful to "shrink the change" by picking one strategy or one small iteration of practice that is connected to a specific goal the teacher wants to achieve or a problem in their practice (for example, using technology to set learning goals). Our coaches have also learned that choosing and modeling tools that don't present huge barriers to entry (such as Google Forms or Socratic for formative assessment or Google Docs for conferencing and giving feedback) can be appropriate entry points for tech-phobic teachers. This approach can also be enhanced by sending personalized, coach-developed how-to videos/screencasts about new technologies.

For teachers who are the most tech-averse, it can be helpful to start the conversation about personalization by suggesting an interactive, no- or low-tech strategy that increases student engagement and personalization and offers a change in instructional modalities (e.g., students acting out physical gestures to illustrate academic vocabulary or traditional vocabulary cards) before introducing a technology-based solution (such as Quizlet) that addresses a similar area of learning.

Technical Skills

Another set of challenges PL novices commonly face has to do with discrete areas of their instructional practice. For example, if a veteran teacher is used to lecturing, the shift towards more personalized modalities of learning can be difficult. New technologies that enable students to work on different skills and content simultaneously have created additional opportunities for teachers to meet one-on-one and in small groups with students. However, the shift towards more frequent student conferencing can be challenging for teachers who have not yet developed the pedagogical skills to use conference time effectively. In cases like this, providing teachers with proven strategies can be enormously helpful to them and their students.

Early-career teachers tend to be digital natives who are comfortable with technology and eager to integrate it into their classes. At the same time, many early-career teachers are still developing their management skills and content mastery. In these cases, the implementation of technology strategies and solutions—even those designed to improve culture and student engagement—can exacerbate already-shaky classroom culture if an early-career PL novice has difficulty in making apps and other ed-tech solutions work in their classrooms the way that they expected.

These types of problems of practice are nuanced and often require highly personalized solutions. However, most PL novices who face discrete technical challenges can make significant progress by focusing on cultivating student collaboration skills so that students can learn explicit strategies for working through their challenges and focusing on improving student discourse so that the overall tone and tenor of classroom dialogue can be elevated.

Strategies that are appropriate for PL novices who are comfortable with technology but are still developing their basic classroom-management repertoires include:

- Early in the school year or during a “reset” period, focus on culture-setting strategies and building confidence and competence with classroom routines and procedures (e.g., transition strategies from one platform, modality, tool or station to another).
- Encourage proactive contingency planning and other troubleshooting planning when technology fails or works more slowly than anticipated.
- Focus on one station at a time in station-rotation models.
- Implement classroom management tools like Class Dojo and non-tech culture-building systems like “Morning Meeting.”

Resistance to Change

As in other areas of teaching and learning, and in life more generally, mindset challenges can be a PL novice’s greatest obstacle to implementing PL strategies. Some experienced teachers are fairly comfortable with technology but are unconvinced initially that new approaches are any better than what they were doing before. Many early-career teachers have been trained to focus on classroom management and control, and so personalization is not necessarily the first analytical lens they use to think about their practice. The following strategies can be effective for working with PL novices who initially appear to have mindset challenges:

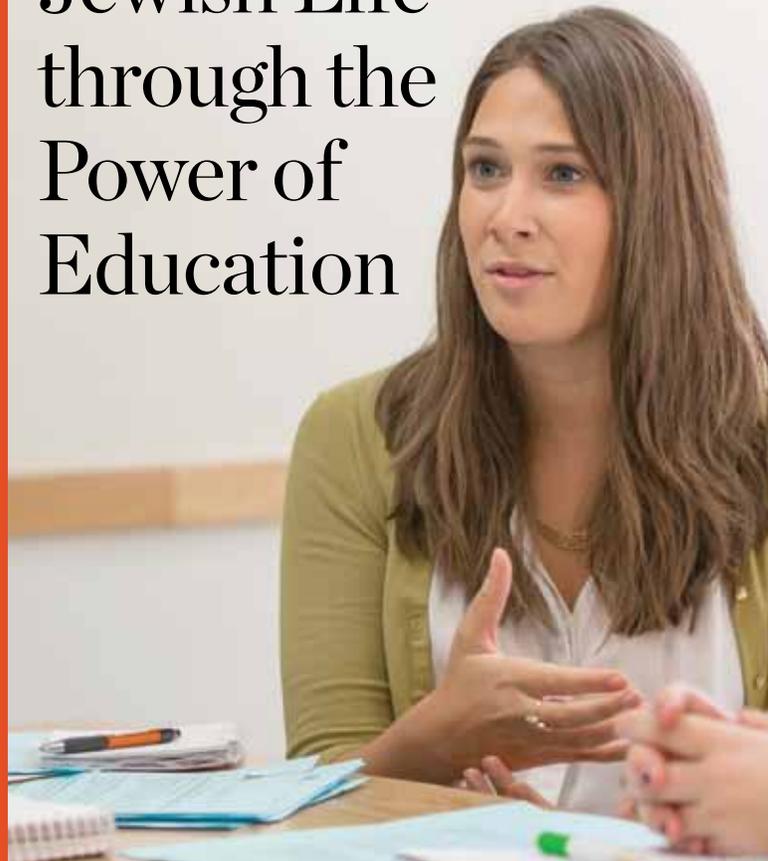
- Encourage them to tell stories about their students until they give the coach a way in.
- Focus on “the why” when thinking about introducing new strategies and linking strategy recommendations to outcomes for students. Show how new strategies can motivate/engage students or help them collaborate more effectively.
- Help them learn how to self-assess.
- Get them to buy into the path they’re taking by asking, “What does this strategy enable you to do that you couldn’t do before?” and “How might this strategy help you solve a problem in your practice?”

Today’s classroom teachers have incredibly powerful learning tools. We also know more about the way the brain works and how we learn than at any other time in human history. Unlike when I was coming up as a young teacher in the early 1990s, the question is no longer whether we can differentiate learning for groups of students with diverse needs, but whether we have the will and the wisdom to train (and retrain) teachers to think of their roles as planners and facilitators of learning that is highly personalized and student-driven. As with most dramatic shifts, there are significant emotional and technical challenges that PL novices face in taking the initial steps towards making the learning experience of their students more engaging, personalized and authentic.

The good news is that we already know much about the support that adult learners need to transform their practice, and it’s not radically different from the needs of their students. Remembering and applying what we know about scaffolding learning and managing complex change and emotions will help us address the most significant human capital challenge of our generation as educators.

Adapted from Personalized Learning on a Continuum: Strategies that Work for Different Teacher Archetypes, a recently released white paper published by BetterLesson.

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Differentiation and Campaign Planning

Before launching a private consulting practice, I served for five years as director of development at a sizable Orthodox school in a major metropolis. On my first visit as a consultant to a small school, I found myself mentally noting all of the “mistakes” my client, the head of school, was making. Board members were involved in grant writing and reporting. The school could not afford a development director, so her lay leadership coordinated the fundraising program. She was allowing her development committee to spend too much time on events. There were standing admissions and marketing committees! I was overwhelmed with the level of dysfunction.

She had hoped that I would understand that her school and, more broadly, her community, was different from others with whom I had worked. Instead I judged her actions and misunderstood the school’s culture. It took me some time to arrive at the conclusion that a narrowly defined approach to day school development work would not serve me (or the school) well. While there are a set of principles and practices that apply to all day school fundraising programs, there are also areas ripe for differentiation based on school size, staffing and affiliation.

Let’s start by examining universal standards for good campaign planning. No matter your school’s size, shape or affiliation, you must have or do the following:

An annual campaign plan. This is a document that outlines the dollars you must raise in a given year, the means by which you will raise them, and the strategies and tactics you will use to achieve your goals. Typically, it breaks down by fundraising constituency and the goals for each target market area, such as major donors, parents, alumni parents, alumni, grandparents, board, community, faculty/staff, etc.

A board that understands its role as capacity builders for the school. Many schools feel their board, or even specific board members, should be able to opt out of this responsibility. I believe there is no exception to this rule: Every board member, at every day school, must be involved with capacity building. That said, the roles board members can play in fundraising extend far beyond just asking for the gift. We need prospect identifiers, cultivators and stewardship ambassadors. Start by asking board members to make thank-you calls to top donors.

Job descriptions. Every volunteer must have a clear sense of his or her role. Board members appreciate written expectations so that there is no misunderstanding about what the job entails. These descriptions typically include expectations with regard to fundraising, meeting attendance and committee assignments.

A moves-management or cultivation/stewardship plan for major gift prospects and donors. This document should outline your plan to regularly interface with your top 20-25 donors and prospects—those who are either already giving at the top of your gift pyramid or have the potential to do so. These are donors and prospects that need hand-holding in order to maximize their giving or realize a first gift.

A development/fundraising committee. A productive development committee can emerge as more than a box on an organizational chart. Fundraising committees tend to organize around target market constituencies: parents, alumni, grandparents, major gifts, etc. Your committee should co-author the campaign plan, serve as prospect identifiers, create and chair events, ask others to lead, evaluate efforts, cultivate relationships and solicit gifts.

A development professional. It is highly unusual for schools to reach their optimal fundraising potential without a part- or full-time development professional leading the effort. Even schools fortunate enough to have exceptionally strong lay leadership will not achieve maximum potential without a professional whose role it is to plan, guide, lead and remain accountable for the fundraising program.

While it is important to establish these universal rules for campaign planning, it is also necessary to differentiate in several areas, including school size, type/affiliation and staffing structure.

Despite my assertion that a school needs a full- or part-time development professional, small schools often feel they can't afford one. What does this mean for your fundraising strategy?

Development planning. It's OK for smaller schools to create development plans that are simple and straightforward. You may not address as many target markets as your larger school counterparts (i.e., it may be impossible to tackle the cultivation of alumni, alumni parents and grandparents within the same fiscal year). It might also be a good idea to eliminate events that do not target major gift development as their core purpose. If your development team is lean, your plan must optimize each member's role and enable the proper cultivation of new donors and the solicitation and stewardship of current stakeholders.

If your campaign year includes multiple events ("a-thons," golf outings, concerts, auctions, dinners) and thus a focus on transactional giving rather than relationship development, you may be sacrificing quality for quantity and using your team's time inefficiently. I recommend you create a plan that trades in the auction for 10-15 one-on-one meetings with donors and prospects. I predict you will raise more money.

The head of school as development director. It's important that a school head partner with the board in stewarding, and often soliciting, key school stakeholders. But keep in mind that at schools with full- or even part-time development directors, heads often play a different role than schools without them. Heads at small schools tend to engage more frequently with fundraising committees, play a more prominent role in the planning and execution of the annual gala, engage in a greater number of one-on-one solicitations, and have a much stronger sense of the campaign's pace. In other words, sometimes the head of school must function in a development director capacity because there is simply no one else to play the role. The ideal scenario is that someone on the school's administrative team serves as the campaign's "project manager," ensuring that timelines are created and followed and leadership are trained and resourced. This allows the head of school and key board leaders to properly cultivate, solicit and steward major donors and prospects.

The moves-management list. The "rule" above stated that you should shoot for a moves-management list that includes your top 20-25 donors and prospects. This rule should be amended for smaller schools or school heads without a development director. The size of your list matters less than the quality. If you can identify even 8-10 donors and prospects that need your attention this year, you are in good shape. Develop a plan that keeps these folks top of mind and schedule your moves with intentionality, thoughtfulness and practicality. Put the moves directly into your Gmail or Outlook calendar. This list should include the individuals, families and foundations without whom your school might not exist, so don't accidentally miss an opportunity to show them what you do and who you are. The moves-management plan insures against these missed opportunities and offers a roadmap to successful donor engagement.

While school size tends to be a strong predictor of campaign size, school type and affiliation also strongly influence both the case for support and campaign operations. A case must reflect a school's economic reality and appeal to the interests of its donor base. A unified approach to campaign messaging will not do. Schools must tap into compelling gift impact messaging when crafting their case, and what is moving for stakeholders at some schools is simply not compelling at another.

Orthodox schools. Orthodox day schools tend to provide a greater percentage of their families with tuition assistance than non-Orthodox schools. Orthodox schools also tend to receive a lower percentage of

their budgets from parent tuition and fees. It is not uncommon for 75% of an Orthodox Jewish day school's student body to request and receive financial aid. This aid is typically funded by the school's annual campaign effort, and therefore messaging around this case for support might be vastly different from that of a school whose support serves 20-40% of its families. Orthodox schools tend to message their campaigns around a commitment to serving every student, regardless of financial ability. The terms "annual campaign" and "scholarship fund" are often used interchangeably because almost every contributed dollar is used to offset the cost of educating those who cannot afford to pay. The bottom line is that schools must tap into compelling gift impact messaging when crafting their case, and what is moving for stakeholders at some schools is simply not compelling at another.

Community schools. For non-Orthodox families, high tuition tends to be the leading factor in the decision to send children to public schools. Reform, Community and Conservative schools tend to operate in or recruit from communities with strong public schools, which present tempting (and free) high-quality options for the non-Orthodox. Therefore, the case for support in these schools is more likely to include messaging around issues of continuity (some note that non-day school alumni are less likely to marry Jews, attend synagogue regularly or observe Shabbat). Campaign messaging for a community school might focus on academic excellence, technology, professional development, Israel programming and college placement, in addition to financial aid. Tuition assistance rates alone may not present a compelling case for support in community schools, and therefore it is important to understand and tap into the stakeholder's motivation to give.

The synagogue-school partnership. Schools that function within a synagogue environment operate from a place of collective interest and investment. Some synagogue-based day schools share development teams and other resources, thus offering an opportunity to message to donors around community building, family education and holistic learning. Often these partnerships wisely choose to solicit only one annual (capital or endowment) gift per member or family each year, and thus these partnerships should spend time understanding the donor's motivation for giving and consider how the gift is achieved. They must think carefully about the right solicitor team, the proper ask amount and appropriate gift timing. Synagogue-schools should also spend time crafting a detailed gift acceptance policy so that leadership are well-versed in responding to questions about directed or restricted giving. By highlighting the collective passion and talents of lay leadership and staff, and the sense of community synagogue-schools are uniquely able to build, the case for support developed by this partnership can be a very powerful. A documented campaign strategy with a well-defined case is a crucial tool for schools of this nature.

Campaign development is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Although there are a set of universal principles and practices that apply to all day school fundraising programs, size, staffing and affiliation may influence the way we develop campaign plans, partner with lay leadership and message our case for support. And while it's good practice to adhere to some universals, it's also healthy to make room for variation, customization and debate, making our fundraising programs more sustainable and successful.

ON BOARD

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT BOARD MEMBERS

QUESTION: *Boards are made up of individuals with different areas of expertise and experience. What strategies have you used to effectively engage all board members?*

Leanne Kaplan, Chair, Committee on Trustees, Atlanta Jewish Academy

At our school, board engagement is a top priority. The team who wrote the first set of by-laws were already thinking about board member engagement when it was decided to keep the board of trustees limited to between 12 and 18 members. This size gives everyone a chance to have his/her voice heard at meetings.

Once a new trustee accepts his/her position on the board, a new trustee orientation is set up. It serves as an opportunity for the new trustees to meet each other and get “up to speed” on board business. The other important fall board event is the annual board retreat. This is a time for the whole board to come together to establish goals for the year and begin the board development process so essential to board engagement.

Our board of trustees meets monthly, and between meetings valuable information is shared electronically. This effort at continuous communication helps keep all board members in the loop and keeps board “homework” top of mind. Lastly, every board member serves as either a chair of or member of a committee. We strive to use committees to keep the work of the board moving and create space for leadership development.

The AJA Board of Trustees values the time and energy every member gives. Keeping board members engaged is the driving force for the way we communicate and our committee structure.

Lesley Zafran, Past President of Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, Florida, and Governance & Strategic Planning Consultant

Although board members have different areas of expertise and experience and different motivations, they all join your school board for one overarching reason: They have an interest in the school’s success.

This shared interest can be used to leverage engagement. When was the last time you asked board members to go around the table and say why they joined the board? Or discussed the school’s vision? (If you don’t have one, write one!) Or had a conversation about what the community would be like if the school didn’t exist? Another strategy is

the Appreciative Inquiry or AI method. All too often we find ourselves talking about what is not going well. Instead, ask your board members to brainstorm the school’s strengths and/or successes in various areas and record them. And there are other great side effects that result from these kinds of discussions: renewed appreciation for the school; stronger camaraderie between board members; different marketing ideas; improved shared language, and possibly even some new ideas for the board to work on.

Engagement remains high when board members feel that they are making a difference and when they see their power as a cohesive team.

Steve Laufer, Board President, Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation’s Capital

How do you engage all board members? Some are easy. For example, we have a new member of our board who in her professional life builds financial models for energy companies. Guess who now has responsibility for the school’s financial model? Similarly, it was a straightforward decision to put our real estate developer in charge of the facilities committee and our Jewish fundraising professional as chair of the advancement committee. But what do we do with the new board member who was chosen for the board for his good judgment and his past financial commitment to the school but doesn’t have skills that fit neatly onto any committee? The one who says “I’ll do whatever I can to help”?

In my limited experience, some board members can become engaged by taking on whatever responsibility needs filling. They just need to be asked, and they will rise to the challenge. Other board members never quite find their niche in committee work but feel they are contributing by raising key issues in board discussions. And some, I will admit, I haven’t yet found a way to fully engage. My hope is that through continued conversation, we will eventually find a project or a role that sparks their passion. In the meantime, the school always needs more board members willing to take seriously their roles as ambassadors, as advocates, and yes, as fundraisers. There is always work to be done, and most board members really do want to contribute to the best of their abilities.

PRIZMAH STAFF

RETREATS TO ADVANCE

This summer, the staff of Prizmah met for a three-day retreat filled with joyous and challenging learning. Especially for a staff widespread over a swath of the United States, it is essential for us all to reconnect in person, to reaffirm the human ties of collegiality that bind us personally and professionally to the mission of strengthening Jewish day schools. The retreat introduced us to new language that would help us think about and collaborate better, and it gave us exercises to start to work on new ways that Prizmah will be engaging with the field. We also took the opportunity to play together (quiz games, bowling!) and to get to know each other better (favorite songs!). We all returned home informed and energized to work with Jewish day schools in the year ahead.



MARC LINDNER
MITCHEL MALKUS

Differentiating Our Schools from the Competition

Differentiation in the classroom, artfully executed, undoubtedly holds the power to enhance student growth and development. In part, it's a matter of identifying individual student strengths and potentials and capitalizing on them. Similarly, on a broader scale, identifying and capitalizing on the strengths and potential of our schools is a means of differentiating them from the competition, and thereby enhancing their growth and development. Such growth and development both moves us closer to providing the richest, most meaningful learning experiences possible for our students and enables us to reach robust enrollment levels.



To consider how to differentiate our schools, let's begin by identifying the competition: for many, other Jewish day schools; for all, a variety of non-Jewish school options (private independent, other faith-based, public, charter). It is not taboo to see other Jewish day schools as competition (albeit friendly). The conceptualization is of a rising tide that lifts all boats, catalyzed by each Jewish day school's efforts to build, strengthen and clearly articulate and promote its unique characteristics and strengths. In such an environment, families would be drawn, overall, to the Jewish day school options within their geographic reach, and they would select the option that is most consistent with their particular beliefs, circumstances and goals. Naturally, if each Jewish day school's efforts to build, strengthen and promote itself are thoughtful and comprehensive, then those efforts will differentiate it from the non-Jewish school options too. The goal is for *all* Jewish day schools to reach new heights and maintain market positions of competitive strength.

Thoughtful and comprehensive efforts to build and strengthen our schools are the focus here, including an important note about marketing. According to marketer Chuck English, "We are part of an experience economy in which there is increasingly no distinction between marketing and the brand. For schools, that means that great experiences are the best driver of marketing, and therefore the most effective school marketing involves creating remarkable experiences." Which begs the question: What should we do to create remarkable experiences that build and strengthen our schools?

Ensuring academic excellence is a must. The education we offer must be the best option for families and students; not equal to, but the best. This means recruiting, hiring and retaining talented teachers. It means having written curricula and regularly evaluating and refining those curricula. It means having written standards, assessing whether those standards are being met consistently throughout the school, and regularly evaluating and refining those standards. It also means having written rules and policies.

To be sure, we are not promoting rigid adherence to rules and policies. Their existence is, in our estimation, tremendously helpful for an excellent academic program. With rules and policies in place, there is then latitude to interpret them and even make exceptions to them as we see fit. Indeed, the act of interpreting rules and policies in light of differing circumstances, and sometimes making exceptions to them, can be an important way to differentiate our schools from the competition. An example is course placement for a student who may not meet our full criteria for an advanced class, but who is close to the full criteria. Sometimes that student, when given the opportunity to take the advanced class, will shine beyond our wildest expectations. Another example is a student who participates in athletics outside of school, with a practice schedule that encroaches on the school day. Technically, allowing such a student to remain enrolled in the school could be a violation of an attendance policy. But if the family is committed to Jewish education and is willing to pay for outside support for the student to keep up with her/his work, then it might be worth making special arrangements in order to retain the student and the family.

Solid customer service is another step for our schools to take. Families feel valued and positive about our schools

when faculty and administrators listen to their thoughts and concerns with an open mind, when their ideas about new initiatives are solicited in advance of implementation, and when faculty and administrators respond to phone calls and emails in a timely fashion and follow up consistently. Implementing true, ongoing, schoolwide customer service requires time, organization and diligence. It requires human beings working in the school to push themselves to make an extra phone call that is not in response to a problem or question. It involves a recognition that our schools exist in partnership with our parents and communities, and making that recognition manifest with stakeholders each and every day.

Having considered factors that help to put our Jewish schools on a level playing field with the other outstanding schools in our communities, we turn to what is unique about us. The unique features of our schools hold transcendent meaning, tapping our ancient traditions and texts, using the Hebrew language, exploring our individual and collective identities, connecting students to their unique communal history, building bridges with the State of Israel, etc. As Rabbi Bob Abramson wrote ("Kedusha as an Integrative Focus"), the sacredness and sanctity of our schools' missions and prudent management of our schools' growth are not mutually exclusive.

To the greatest extent possible, we should leverage what we have that cannot be duplicated. The Jewish nature of our schools is itself a differentiator of significant value to be communicated. We instill Jewish values in our students. We make *mentsches*. We oversee rich, meaningful recognition of and participation in the *chaggim* (Jewish holidays), and include parents and other community members when appropriate. We mark lifecycle events for our families. We celebrate in times of joy. We serve as an anchor in times of difficulty and tragedy. Continue to give the school's Jewish identity and culture thought and attention because we hold privileged positions of influence, because they are part of our obligation, because they are among the best ways to elevate our schools.

While the unique features we have noted thus far are apparent to the majority of our current families and prospective families, we hold additional differentiators that need to be brought to light. Foremost among them is the quality of leadership fostered in Jewish schools. Professor Robert Sternberg ("Testing for Better and Worse") argues that today's leaders need two qualities in particular: creativity and wisdom. Creativity is usually dependent on context, involves divergent thinking, can lead to multiple good answers, regularly deals with a lack of structure, and is often dependent on multiple perspectives. The exercise of wisdom is unique because it involves dialectical and dialogical thinking and a consideration of ethics, competing interests, values and the role of the common good.

The creativity and wisdom described by Sternberg pulsates within the interdisciplinary learning that is endemic to the dual curricula of Jewish day schools. Although the balance of Judaic studies to general studies and how each is taught may differ across our schools, our students are all, indeed, immersed in interdisciplinary learning. When Jewish text, Jewish history, the arts, English, Hebrew language, other languages, history, math and science are part of students' regular educational programs, connections are made across those disciplines. Sometimes the connections need to be

Differentiating Our Schools From the Competition

by Marc Lindner & Mitchel Malkus

IDENTIFYING AND CAPITALIZING ON OUR INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS AND POTENTIALS

Academic Excellence



- Talented teachers
- Written curricula (regularly evaluated & refined)
- Written standards (regularly evaluated & refined)
- Written rules & policies (interpret & make exceptions as necessary)

Customer Service



- Listen with an open mind
- Solicit ideas about new ideas before implementation
- Respond to phone calls & emails in a timely manner
- Follow up consistently
- Recognize partnership of parents & community
- Take the extra step



What makes us unique?

- Transcendent meaning
- Ancient traditions & texts
- Hebrew language
- Individual & collective identities
- Unique communal history
- Connections to Israel
- Jewish values
- Holiday observance & lifecycle events

Our dual curricula are a unique strength in cultivating the skills & habits of mind required in today's world. Study of Talmud gives our students a leg up on their competition & we ought to sing its praises loudly & frequently.

Andrea Hernandez

initiated by teachers, but given the fertile interdisciplinary ground we occupy, students often find the connections on their own. They may begin to see, for example, that verses of Tanakh inform American literature, and that thinking about the two together brings new and deeper meaning to each. Or they may realize that the study of genetics opens a world of ethical considerations that can be teased out through Jewish law. And research has demonstrated that when students make interdisciplinary connections, they exercise many of the same intellectual and social-emotional muscles that Sternberg attributes to leading with creativity and wisdom. Specifically, interdisciplinary learning stimulates the ability to move beyond preconceived notions through consideration of multiple perspectives, to think critically (which incorporates divergent, dialectical and dialogical thinking), to tolerate ambiguity/lack of structure, and to acknowledge and appreciate ethical concerns. Our dual curricula are a unique strength in cultivating the skills and habits of mind required in today's world.

Study of the Talmud similarly embodies the criteria for Sternberg's categories of creativity and wisdom. The Talmud is

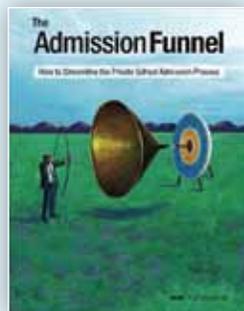
a tradition representing a variety of voices, perspectives and interpretations, all addressing issues and problems of timeless import: issues of ethics and morality, issues that engender competing interests, and problems for which there is more than one correct answer. The talmudic ethic elicits discussion, debate and collaboration. It builds skills in developing and supporting reasoned arguments, as well as listening skills. Its focus on relentless questioning hearkens to today's inquiry-based learning. It gives our students a leg up on their competition, and we ought to sing its praises loudly and frequently.

We face challenges. Enrollment, the cost of operations and high tuition levels are significant barriers to overcome. But we have very good reason to persist. We have a legacy to protect. We have a history to honor. We live in a world that needs our contributions. We have the raw materials to achieve at extraordinary levels. If we use what we were given and differentiate ourselves, the fulfillment of our unique missions will follow.

We are grateful to Chuck English of English Marketing Works for his insights and comments related to this article.

ON MY NIGHTSTAND

BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS THAT PRIZMAH STAFF ARE READING



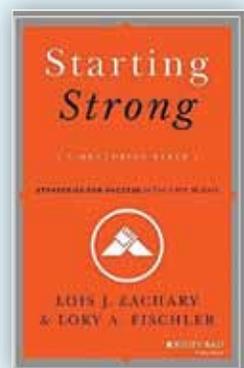
The Admission Funnel: How to Streamline the Private School Admission Process

edited by Weldon Burge

An exceptional handbook for new and experienced admission professionals, *The Admission Funnel* provides detailed suggestions for managing families through each step in the process: inquiry, visit, application, assessment, acceptance, enrollment, matriculation and retention. Included are practical applications with samples, strategies and techniques that will help to set the framework for continued enrollment success. There are a wide range of admission-related topics, from marketing and word-of-mouth to the roles board members, the school receptionist, faculty and other school community members play in the recruitment and retention process.

Even those of us who are experienced admission professionals need support and a refresher on strategies and approaches to finding mission-appropriate students for our schools. I highly recommend *The Admission Funnel* not just to all members of the admission and marketing team but for other school leaders, too. Recruitment and retention is everyone's responsibility; as Helen Keller stated so eloquently, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Adele Yermack



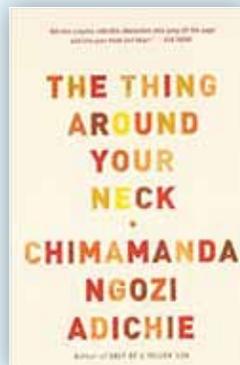
Starting Strong

by Lois J. Zachary and Lory A. Fischler

Starting Strong is a fable describing the beginning of a mentoring relationship. Through the tale of Cynthia and Rafa, mentor and mentee, the authors reveal the pitfalls and the potential of mentoring. I read it cover to cover over Shabbat and ordered my own copy right after Havdalah. I know I'll be returning to it over and over.

I found myself reflecting deeply on many of my relationships, both when I'm offering mentorship and when I'm receiving it. I nodded at areas in which I do well; I winced in recognition of mistakes I've made and opportunities I've missed. More than a quick, enjoyable and relatable read, *Starting Strong* is incredibly practical. I went to work on Monday morning with a plan for two powerful conversations I was having that day, one as mentor and one as mentee. Both were enriched by the book's strategies and mindfulness. For educators who want to navigate richer, more productive conversations, this book is a must-read.

Shira Heller



The Thing Around Your Neck

by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

I first discovered Adichie's powerful writing when I read her novel, *Americanah*, which follows the story of a Nigerian graduate student living in America. It introduced me to Nigerian history and culture and made me think about race and identity in entirely new ways. I was excited to pick up this book of short stories, and was quickly drawn in by the rich and compelling characters. The collection of 12 stories focuses on lives of Nigerian women and their experiences with political violence, navigating new marriages, moving to new places and being caught between worlds.

My favorite stories were those set in America, exploring similar themes to those in *Americanah*. Adichie's storytelling provides a window into the complexity of living a dual identity, something that Jews can surely relate to.

Yael Steiner



Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed

by James Scott

I recently started rereading James Scott's beautifully brutal *Seeing Like a State*. A current staple of graduate-level social science course syllabi throughout the country, Scott's work tours a wide array of centrally managed, modern, progressive, state-led interventions that have spectacularly failed. The cases, from collectivist Russia to compulsory villages in Tanzania, are, by themselves, fascinating reads, rich in detail and full of the voices of those who participated.

But it's Scott's argument that made me want to re-read this book. Any centralized plan to intercede in ("to better") the social fabric of communities is absolutely doomed unless local customs and the practical knowledge valued in that context are taken seriously, if not with a degree of higher authority. It's an immensely humbling and valuable book. And, as Prizmah works to support and, yes, sometimes challenge the field of Jewish day schools to "do better," it's absolutely imperative for us to remind ourselves that without collaborating with practitioners, administrators, community members and all those invested in Jewish day schools—we got nothing.

Matt Williams



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