

Professional Culture and Professional Development in Jewish Schools: Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences

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In this article, we report a study of professional culture and professional development in Jewish school based on the experience of each and of the staff and in the Jewish principal. We first introduce the research context: professional culture, professional development, and professional learning communities. We then describe the methodology used in the study. We then describe the findings of each of the three professional learning communities. We then discuss the implications of the findings for Jewish school and the future of school identified in the literature.

curriculum, instructional goals, and student learning. Such interactions require an infrastructure in schools that give teachers opportunities for sustained work around teaching and learning.

While there is still much to learn about the professional cultures of public schools, professional cultures and opportunities for teacher learning in Jewish schools have received even less attention. There are some studies of formal professional development opportunities for Jewish educators (Dorph & Holtz, 2000; Holtz 2000), but more school-based research describing and analyzing the current circumstances of teachers' work in both day and supplementary schools is needed. Where do Jewish schools stand on the path toward developing more effective structures and opportunities to support student and teacher learning?

In this article, we report a study of professional culture and professional development in Jewish schools based on surveys of teachers and other staff and interviews with principals. We first introduce three key constructs: professional culture, professional development, and professional learning communities. We then describe research that has identified features of each that support teacher learning. With this background in mind, we compare the current realities in Jewish schools as gleaned through the survey with typical public schools and with the features of schools identified in the literature as supportive of teacher learning and collegiality. Finally, we suggest next steps that might be taken to improve Jewish schools as settings

take it for granted that they should comment on each other's work, and have the time to develop common standards for student work" (1992, 602-603).

Meier's description of a professional environment that supports teacher

THE STUDY

Study Method

Ideas about professional culture and professional development in public schools provided an important starting point for our research. Ten schools in an eastern metropolitan area participated in the study (2 day high schools, 1 day elementary school, and 7 after school programs). All denominations were represented in the sample. The research team developed a survey to gather basic information about the conditions and opportunities in Jewish schools related to professional culture and professional development.¹ The survey incorporated items from previous investigations as well as some of our own. (Items used in this paper are listed in the Appendix.) We distributed the survey to all the teachers in the 10 partici-

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certainly a necessary, but not sufficient,

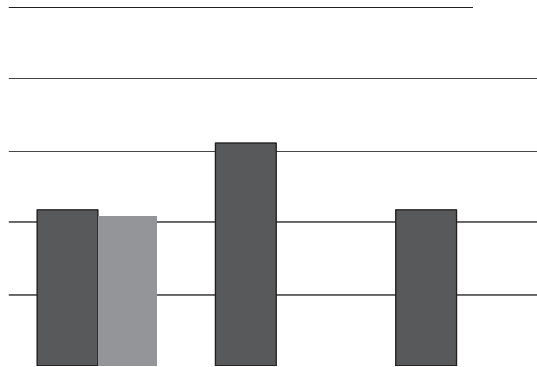


FIGURE 3. Observation opportunities for teachers: Day schools (N = 69) and afternoon schools (N = 74).

in these schools. As Figure 3 shows, 60% of teachers in day schools report observing another teacher at least once and 40% report being observed by a colleague. In contrast, only about 20% of congregational school teachers observed a colleague or were observed by another teacher.

If observation is a promising vehicle for professional development and a contributing element to a collaborative professional culture, Jewish schools need to find ways for teachers to observe one another. This may present a special challenge in afternoon schools because of the part-time nature of afterschool teaching. One of the principals we interviewed, when asked if teachers in her school have a chance to see each other teaching said, “Rarely. [you need to] consciously free somebody up to go watch somebody teach. It’s not easy.” Providing opportunities for teachers to observe one another in an ongoing fashion presents a challenge in most school settings, even for school leaders who understand the educational benefits of classroom observation for all teachers. Perhaps technology could help here (e.g., video taping for future viewing)—a point to which we will return in our discussion of implications.

Principal Leadership and Creating Opportunities for Teacher Growth

Principals can play a key role in enabling teacher development by creating time and structures for teachers to work together, providing instructional

support, publicly valuing serious experimentation in support of student learning, allocating resources, and offering encouragement (Little, 1984; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Most teachers in all the schools surveyed agreed with the statements: "The principal is interested in innovations and new ideas" and "Teachers are encouraged to experiment with their teaching." However, the challenge for the principal is to create structures and opportunities (e.g., common planning times, co-teaching arrangements, video taping opportunities, and summer curriculum development projects) that enable teachers to work together on issues of teaching and learning. We found limited evidence of such arrangements in these schools.

Teachers also may benefit from personal recognition by principals, especially if they are trying out new practices. In only 5 out of 10 schools did the majority of teachers agree with a statement indicating that they "were recognized for a job well done." Interestingly, day school teachers reported less recognition for a job well done than did teachers in afternoon schools. The importance of principal leadership in creating and maintaining a collaborative professional culture in a school has been well documented. One ingredient of such a culture would be conversations about teaching

courses (8%) and BJE institutes (6%). Many of these learning opportunities were limited in scope, occupying only a few hours of teachers' time.

Educational research and practical experimentation suggest that such activities need to be of sufficient duration to have an impact on teacher's practices. Knapp (2003) reports that Garet et al. (1999) found "teachers were more likely to implement what they learned when they experienced professional development that was continuous, on-going and long-term (i.e., minimum of 40–50 hours)" among other features (p. 121). Over half of the professional development experiences reported by the teachers had three or fewer sessions and lasted six hours or less. On the other hand, about 14% of the activities occupied 30 or more hours and 38% of these were college courses. The titles of the college courses taken by teachers in the sample contain a mix of Jewish content, such as Hebrew, and general pedagogy, such as cooperative learning. Conversations with participants who attended these courses suggest that the subject matter rarely had direct connections to teacher's classroom practices or provided the kind of onsite follow-up necessary to help teachers incorporate content and pedagogy into their teaching practice. While college courses can expose teachers to important new knowledge and skills, improved teaching and learning only comes about when teachers learn to use this knowledge in their practice. In most cases, teachers need help figuring out how to do this (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003).

Professional development is more effective when groups of teachers from the same school participate together, making follow-up and collegial interaction more likely (Knapp, 2003). In the professional development experiences that the survey teachers reported, 48% were attended by individuals while the rest were attended by school teams. Most likely the school-based workshops served their own teachers. We do not know the extent to which professional development opportunities were tied to teachers' actual classroom practices, only that 40% were offered at school sites. The majority of school-based professional development workshops held during school time or during nonschool hours were not sustained over time. Teachers reported that 70% of the workshops occupied six or fewer hours and 59% consisted of one or two sessions. At the other extreme, 10% consisted of 10 sessions while 16 hours was the maximum number of hours for any school-based workshop.

Teachers also reported the content of professional development experiences. Thirty-four percent had Jewish content, while 57% had pedagogical content. The content emphasis varied by the type of school: Day school teachers participated in activities which tended to emphasize pedagogical content; supplementary school teachers experienced more Jewish content. This pattern may reflect the assumed needs of the two groups. In fact, teachers in both types of schools need opportunities to deepen and extend their content knowledge and learn how to teach it effectively to their

teachers together once a month to examine their holiday curriculum and study Jewish texts. Over a nine-year period, the study group spent most of its time on big ideas in Judaism. For example, the third year's theme was

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There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members.
This school seems like a big family, everyone is so close and cordial.
Goals and priorities for the school are clear.
The principal is interested in innovations and new ideas.
In this school, I am encouraged to experiment with my teaching.
Teachers are recognized for a job well done.