

# EXCELLENCE IN JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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*It was an exciting day in the lives of the four-year-old class. They had planned and prepared for this event for months. It was time for 24 children to leave their safe, secure and serene environment and move on to the next step in their lives. Parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends were entering the building with cameras, flowers and presents. The energy was palpable. The teachers were in the classrooms with the children sharing their last minute instructions. The children could hardly contain themselves.*

*Behind the scenes that same morning, I had the privilege of working with Jared who was distributing the programs. After the programs were placed on approximately 90 chairs, Jared realized we were ten programs short. He came to me with a very specific directive. "Joanie, we need ten more programs, go upstairs and make ten more copies, okay?" Realizing, after all, that Jared was just turning five, I asked him if he thought we should make more than ten copies, in case other visitors showed up for the celebration. He looked at me in such a way that I will never forget, and repeated his directive, but this time used his hands and all ten fingers to emphatically state, "I counted the chairs, we are ten short, and we need only ten." I reluctantly said, "Okay, I will be right back with the copies." As I stood at the copier for what seemed like an hour trying to decide if I should respect Jared's decision and make ten more copies, knowing I would probably have to go back upstairs to make more when more people arrived, I pressed the number ten on the copier machine. As I watched Jared proudly and competently place each program on the remaining ten chairs, I realized how empowered and capable this young boy felt.*

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Jared's story is about quality in Jewish early childhood education (JECE). The research that we present for the first time in this chapter demonstrates that JECE impacts the engagement of families in Jewish life. The analyses also revealed that this is a far more complex process than simply intensifying the Judaic content of the educational program. The key factor is the level of excellence of the JECE program's underlying

“operating system.” It is worth considering that the parents who rate that their children’s JECE programs operate at a superb level are more open to enhancing their lives with Jewish connections. Thus, for many parents the promotion of children’s Jewish identity is not an important criterion when choosing a JECE program. However, if they perceive and experience the JECE programs as excellent and well-run, they will become more engaged in Jewish actions after they enroll their children as a “side effect.” While Joanie Smeltz’s finger was suspended over the copy button, she was making a cross-road decision. The decision that she made to listen to children, respect them, and provide them with opportunities to make decisions for themselves exemplifies the level of excellence essential to influencing the lifepaths of the children and their families’ formation of a strong relationship to the Jewish people.

In JECE, there are many talented directors and teachers, beautiful buildings, sparkling curriculum, small classes in safe surroundings, and educators willing to personally change in order to promote children’s learning and development. The problem is that the ground is shifting. Haynes, Ben-Avie, and Gilliam (2000), Yale Child Study Center, explain the roots of what is known today as Universal Pre-Kindergarten. At the Yale Child Study Center, a collegial debate raged between Edward Zigler and James P. Comer that was to span decades—until the two decided to collaborate. Associated in the public mind with Head Start was Edward Zigler, Director of the Office of Child Development and Chief of the Children’s Bureau in Washington, D.C. He was later to join the Yale Child Study Center. James P. Comer, associate dean of the Yale School of Medicine founder of the Yale Child Study Center’s School Development Program, was well aware of Zigler’s work and the newly-established Head Start.

At the heart of the matter were children walking into the doors of elementary schools who were not “ready” for school, according to the school staff. In response, Zigler took the lead in establishing a new national infrastructure to “immunize” the children against the negative developmental experiences that they were likely to encounter in schools. This infrastructure became known as “Head Start.” If it is possible to “awaken” or “spark” young children’s development, and thus accelerate the developmental process, shouldn’t early childhood programs organize themselves in a way that would make this happen? This was the central premise of Head Start. The U.S. government could have taken the approach to wait until the children reach kindergarten and address the achievement gap at that educational level. Instead, the U.S. Economic Opportunities Act of 1964 launched Head Start, a program for three- and four-year-old children, that was designed to help children overcome the deprivation caused by poverty. By way of contrast, Comer took the stance that if the problem inheres in the elementary schools, then the best solution was to fix the “bad” schools. In his approach, the aim of early childhood education is to provide underprepared children with positive developmental experiences—not to solve the problem that the teachers in elementary schools were underprepared to educate all children.

A renewed interest in early childhood education emerged with the launching of the Goals 2000 education initiative by President Clinton in 1994 which stated that by the year 2000 “all children will start school ready to learn.” The statement admitted that not all children were ready. The mood at the time was captured by Hayes, Ben-Avie, and Gilliam: “Labeling a child unready for school may serve to release the school from the responsibility of promoting that child’s development. Given the potential of schools’

early intervention programs to act as positive catalysts in the lives of children, we ask *Are schools ready to promote development among all the children?*” (p. 93). The results of model preschool programs and large-scale preschool programs that were newly-published at that time provided solid evidence of the long-term impact of early childhood education. Consistent with the theme of this chapter, the most relevant finding was “High quality programs clearly have the potential of improving the school readiness of these children and can often lead to remarkable long-term effects in terms of improved functioning in school, work, and life” (p. 99).

Today’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten is designed to provide all preschool-aged children with an opportunity to learn in a supportive, high-quality, literacy-rich educational environment prior to entering kindergarten; as a state-funded initiative, all families have access to this free program. It is free—and here inheres the challenge to Jewish early childhood education (JECE). Consider the school choice decision that many Jewish parents face when weighing free public school vs. expensive Jewish day school education. Until the introduction of Universal Pre-Kindergarten, we, the authors, could have thought that we were very close to actualizing the hopes that we had when we were voices in the wilderness calling for attention to be paid to early childhood within the Jewish community. Up until recently, we could have expected natural growth to occur in JECE as more and more school communities learned about the learning and developmental outcomes among young children like Jared in Jewish early childhood education. (The latest estimate of the number of children in JECE is 123,000 in total, of which about 104,000 are Jewish. This estimate is based Schapp and Goodman, 2004). With the introduction of Universal Pre-K, this natural growth is not as assured. Now that

families have an absolutely free option for early childhood education, JECE programs will increasingly need to demonstrate excellence in order to recruit and retain families.

Despite the introduction of Universal Pre-K, Jewish early childhood education has the potential to thrive. At this cross-road, the next best step is to consider anew the premises underlying Jewish early childhood education. Fortunately, this work of reflection and action has already started. In 2007, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) convened a session for Jewish early childhood professionals at the national conference (authors of this chapter who were affiliated with CAJE include Eli Schaap, Ilene Vogelstein, and Roberta Goodman). The result of that discussion was a draft statement on *Key Elements for Creating a Jewish early childhood education Program* (<http://www.caje.org/earlychildhood/JewishEC-DraftStatement.asp>). The aim of Jewish early childhood education is addressed in the opening section of the “Key Elements” document. This opening section is noteworthy because of the dual focus on children and on families. The statement also articulates engagement in Jewish life as the outcome.

The purpose of Jewish early childhood education (JECE) is to lay the foundation for lifelong Jewish engagement by supporting the development and enhancement of the Jewish identity of children and their families through Jewish knowledge, Jewish values, and Jewish experiences.

*Key Elements for Creating a Jewish early childhood education Program* concludes with a section on excellence. The focus of this chapter, therefore, is on excellence in Jewish early childhood education.

## **Voices in the Wilderness**

Influenced by *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000), a partnership was established in 2002 to begin the development of a set of quality indicators, anchored in relevant theory and research, for describing excellence in Jewish early childhood education. The partnership with the Center for Applied Child Development (CACD) at Tufts University's Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development was initiated by one of us (Ilene Vogelstein). The seeds of this partnership were sown in 1979 when a group of 6 women met at the conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) at what was to become the first meeting of the Jewish Caucus of NAEYC (later renamed the National Jewish Early Childhood Network). These "matriarchs" were the early childhood professionals in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago.

In 1998, the Mandel Foundation published *The Teachers Report: A Portrait of Teachers in Jewish Schools*. Among the findings, the report noted that 55% of the early childhood teachers had received no Jewish education after the age of 13, 22% had received no Jewish education before the age of 13 and only 15% had received a day school education before the age of 13. The report surveyed teachers in three communities (Baltimore, Milwaukee and Atlanta). When the report was shared with the Baltimore leadership, the family of The Children of the Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Foundation decided to invest in Jewish early childhood education and established Machon L'Morim: Bereshit.

In June 2000, The Children of the Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Foundation convened a regional conference on Jewish early childhood education. At the

conclusion of the conference, the attendees agreed to contribute funds to obtain more information regarding the Jewish early childhood education profession. In this way, the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership, a partnership of six philanthropists, was launched. The funders later contributed to the establishment of a permanent national home where advocacy, research and services could be offered to this emerging field. The home was the Early Childhood Department at the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE).

CAJE partnered with the Center for Applied Child Development (CACD) at Tufts University's Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development. This research, coupled with the demographic research on Jewish early childhood programs (Vogelstein & Kaplan, 2002) and the impact of an Jewish early childhood education on families (Beck, 2002) was a catalyst for intensifying the discussions identifying the issues facing Jewish early childhood education.

In developing the quality indicators for Jewish early childhood education, the Tufts researchers (2004) rejected using "developmentally appropriate practices" as the standard. All of the accreditation guides that were reviewed and critiqued referred to standards of excellence that were developed by the National Association for the Education of Youth Children (NAEYC), the leading (non-Jewish) accrediting agency in the country for early childhood programs. These standards emphasize the importance of "developmentally appropriate practices" (DAP). The researchers from Tufts commented on this term: "This somewhat overused term for excellence in early childhood education is rarely defined in detail; as a result, the phrase developmentally appropriate is subject to multiple interpretations. For example, some early childhood educators believe

developmentally appropriate means that children are using hands-on materials. This simplistic definition may lead them to over-emphasize the importance of activities, even if those activities have no clear learning goals” (p. 2). Thus, the quality indicators were listed under six categories: (1) Program development and leadership; (2) Curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (3) School and classroom environment; (4) Interactions with children; (5) Partnerships with parents and families; and (6) Partnerships with host institutions.

From the work of the partnership between CAJE and Tufts emerged such initiatives as The Alliance for Jewish Early Education, the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI), the development of a new Jewish Child Development Associates (CDA) degree, and the partnership among seven institutions of higher learning to develop an initiation course for educators in Jewish early childhood education. JECEI was funded by several Jewish philanthropic institutions in 2004. According to JECEI’s logic model, the initiative increases the capacity of lay and professional leaders to effect change. In December 2005, The Alliance for Jewish Early Education, was established. The Alliance is open to any international, national, or communal organization addressing Jewish early childhood education. In this way, professionals holding a national, international or communal portfolio in Jewish early childhood education have an opportunity to learn, grow and support each other while they collectively advocate, network, and collaborate to advance the field of Jewish early childhood education. The examples used in this chapter draw on our experiences in these organizations and the research that we conducted in our professional capacity.



## **Development as the Aim of Early Childhood Education**

While there are over 1,300 Jewish early childhood programs in the United States, (CAJE Early Childhood Department and JECEI, 2003) there is not a consensus regarding the aim of Jewish early childhood education. What should JECE promote? Coleman and Hoffer (1987) in their description of the basis for private schools write that the “school is an extension of the family, reinforcing the family’s values. The school is *in loco parentis*, vested with the authority of the parent to carry out the parent’s will” (p. 3). According to this approach, the aim of JECE is to help create the next generation in the “image of the preceding one” (p. 4). By way of contrast, an alternative approach builds on the families’ hopes and aspirations for their children. Education is seen as a way to improve society by promoting developmental outcomes that will result in the second generation becoming different than their parents (e.g., more engaged in Jewish life). Thus, it is enticing for Jewish organizations to see JECE as a way of promoting Jewish continuity. The second approach also opens the door for educative institutions to promote the learning and development of both generations at the same time.

Both of these approaches have to wrestle with the transmission of Judaism’s very large sociocultural inheritance (*dor l’dor*). On one side of the equation is an inheritance that is comprised of all the group life events of Jews as well as the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years. On the other side of the equation are very small children.

Young children may not understand, yet, the knowledge of past generations encased within concepts embedded within the sacred texts. Through guided play, however, they will encounter language, behavior, attitudes, and practices associated with these concepts. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that it is possible to “awaken” or “spark” child development. As a Jew, it is not surprising that Vygotsky dealt with the

psychological mechanism through which a large sociocultural inheritance is transferred to young children. This psychological mechanism is concept formation because embedded within concepts are ideas, values, and historical events from past generations. Consider the concept of the exile of the Shekhina (“the presence of G-d in the world”). Other concepts are the “world to come,” “divine providence,” “tzedekah.” Vygotsky explained that thought and language are intertwined. Thus, young children develop the ability to think conceptually. Initially, young children develop pseudoconcepts, verbal labels that are initially without content. For example, a child may know the verbal label of “covenant” or “Tikkun Olam” (responsibility to change one’s self and thereby the world). Vygotsky considered the development of pseudoconcepts as a critical step in the process of developing actual concepts. Thus, young children may engage in Shabbat activities at their JECE programs, even if they do not have yet a fully-developed grasp of the essence of Shabbat as a “sanctuary in time,” to quote Heschel (1951, p. 29).. Without the verbal label, actual concepts will not emerge later in time. Through which activity do children form everyday concepts? Play!

This approach stands in contrast to the “academic-oriented” preschools that seek to give children a “head start” through direct instruction. For example, Haynes and Ben-Avie et al. (2002) observed educators in early childhood centers compelling three-year-olds to “write” their names before permitting them to play. Play was considered an activity on the periphery of the core mission of academic learning—“recess,” as it were. The approach of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) is to draw out the competencies of children to inquire, explore, wonder in order that—through play—

they actively process everyday experiences under Judaism's framework of thoughts, emotions, actions, and ways of partaking in community.

At the Yale Child Study Center, the study group on play investigates the mental actions involved in children's fantasy play. For example, Mayes and Cohen (2006) observe that "*just pretending* provides a world where the child is able to try out relationships, identifications, and solutions" (p. 130). For 3- to 5-year old children, imagination represents a special mode of mental functioning that motivates them toward increasingly complex relationships with others. Linda Mayes and Donald Cohen (2006) explain:

With a capacity for imagination, relationships with others are colored both by the child's previous experiences and by his imagined wishes and beliefs. The capacity for sustained imaginary play emerges in parallel with the child's acquisition of an understanding of how the actions and words of others reflect and are motivated by their feelings, beliefs, wishes, and memories, each actions of mind. Such an understanding allows the child to imbue the persons in his imaginary play with complex feelings and desires towards others, and to create the stories, or an inner world, by which he defines himself and through which he will continue to view and define his external world. (p. 145)

Unfortunately, early childhood programs became increasingly "academic-oriented." To illustrate, *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* ran an article under the following headline: "Play: The New Dirty Word." In the article, Mary Mindess (August 2001) wrote: "Play is extremely important. It's part of being human. It shouldn't get lost in the push toward higher standards. It is, in fact, one of the factors that contributes to higher standards, as well as to psychological and social well-being. When we discourage free time for play, a great deal of creative energy is lost to the individual, and ultimately, society becomes the loser" (p. 7). Unfortunately, children are playing less these days as academic lessons are introduced as early as preschool. Mindess describes

the prevalent attitude: “We’ve got to give children the right start.” She translates this phrase to mean, “We’ve got to give children the best chance to get the highest test scores” (ibid).

Similar to Dewey (1938), Comer recognized that activities had to be meaningful to the children in the here-and-now, and not only in service of a far-away goal. Thus, the first curriculum that he designed addressed the children’s social skills, and not their test scores. He is steadfast in that it’s all about relationships. The relations that children form in early childhood education could serve as a template for all future healthy relationships. This is especially important because children at this age “strive always to learn how to be, how to act, how to cope, how to adapt, how to solve problems” (Noshpitz and King, 1991, p. 319). It is for this reason that an excellent JECE program builds into the schedule of the day time for children to explore relationships with others—and with themselves. Time for self-discovery, time for self-expression through such means as music and art, time for experiencing the ways of partaking in community, time for engaging in group play, time for engaging in fantasy—all these are characteristics of excellent JECE programs. James Fowler (1986) made a similar point in his description of the stage of faith that is relevant to young children (pp. 236-232): Stage I Intuitive-Projective faith is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults.

The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI), as a Reggio inspired approach that incorporates Fowler’s key teachings about faith development, falls into the constructivist and progressive educational “camps.” Constructivism focuses on the

knowledge and meaning that learners make from their experiences. Learners are active participants, not just recipients of knowledge. Learners participate fully in the educational process including setting direction of what is learned, how it is learned, and evaluating or reflecting on the educational experience. Progressivism similarly focuses on the importance of experience, but adds to the conversation the larger significance of education to a people, society, culture, or nation. Dewey's (1938) emphasis on the need for educating citizens for democracy to survive and thrive greatly influenced modern education in the United States for both children and adults. The schools of Reggio Emilia have embraced him as a major thinker in formulating their philosophy and approach.

The schools of Reggio Emilia offer an education based on the theories of Dewey and Vygotsky among others, but elevated to a new level of practice. For example, the schools of Reggio have developed the practice of documentation of children's work to a level unforeseen beforehand. In general, early childhood programs tend to be oral cultures and, therefore, activity-based learning activities soon fade from memory. Documentation makes the process of learning visible to children, educators, families, and community members. In this way, the documentation sparks reflection and growth. However, the approach of Reggio Emilia cannot be simply replicated, despite the claims of numerous schools billing themselves as "Reggio schools" who have only copied specific methods and tools. At the foundation of the holistic approach of Reggio Emilia is an historical and culturally-specific vision of what it means to live a full life as a citizen in an Italian democracy (Edwards et al., 1998). This represents both the goal of education and the values that are embodied in the educational practices of the schools. Thus, to develop a

Reggio-inspired JECE program entails understanding and articulating an historical and culturally-specific vision of what it means to live a full Jewish life in contemporary society.

Other types of schools are constructivist and/or progressive without being Reggio inspired. Montessori early childhood programs of which there are some Jewish early childhood programs and more influenced by this approach share many of the same foundational ideas about children and their capabilities and importance to society as do Reggio inspired schools. Yet, Montessori schools have their own distinctive approach to early childhood education. Play theory is a popular approach that many Jewish schools have embraced either for their school as a whole or as an educational strategy (e.g., play with blocks). Informed by Piaget's understanding of development among others, play theory supports the notion that children learn and grow not just cognitively, but in terms of social and emotional growth, through playing with their peers. Play allows children to discover lessons about life.

The greatest intersection between JECEI and the Yale Child Study Center's Comer Process is the use of child development as a framework for decision making. In professional development academies of both initiatives, educators learn to see children's everyday experiences from a developmental perspective. To illustrate this point, consider the case of the boy and circle time. The teacher sang a song to signal the transition to announce that it was to circle time. All the children ran to the mat—except for Jacques. He continued playing in the block area. The teacher finally went over to him and asked, “Did you not hear the song we sing to announce circle time?” He replied, “I heard the song.” She said, “When we sing the song, everyone is to stop what they are doing and

come to the circle.” He then asked, “What’s with you teachers?” It’s not hard to understand why a teacher might view the interaction through the “lens” of order and discipline. Thus, her response was to punish the child. Was there another “lens” she could have used to interpret the interaction? For example, JECEI (Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative) uses seven lenses, big ideas about Jewish living and learning to inform the educational process. If she had viewed the situation through the lens of *b’tzelem elokim* (the image of God) which JECEI associates with cultivating the potential of each child, then perhaps she would have cheerfully clapped her hands together and remarked, “What a great question! Let’s go to the circle area and talk about why do we feel that it is necessary several times a day to gather all the children together for circle time? Would you like to start the discussion?” In this scenario, she “listened” to what the child really wanted to ask—and not to how he phrased his question. Through showing educators how an interaction may be considered from different perspectives, they learn that children’s behavior is a form of communication, and an opportunity for individual children and the whole community to grow.

The lenses that JECEI uses are concepts that are embedded with ideas, values, and historical events from past generations (<http://jecei.org/lenses.html>). Consider the lens of *Hit’orerut* which alludes to the mystical concept of G-d awakening those who slumber. JECEI took this concept and applied it to early childhood education: Awakening (Amazement and Gratitude). From the outer reaches of the universe to the smallest atoms, there is much in the world to fill us with amazement and respect. Wonder fuels a culture of inquiry and reflection. By way of contrast, educators who view children

through the lens of order and discipline are likely to see children “getting into things,” making “messes,” and “excessively mischievous.”

JECEI today uses the lenses as a framework for decision making as well as a set of guiding principles: The lenses are ideally manifest daily in JECEI early childhood centers in the ways they structure their time; curricula and classrooms; the quality of relationships with the children, educators, and host institutions, and the partnerships JECEI forges with the families. The lenses are a response to the ambivalence of what is “Jewish” in Jewish early childhood education.

When the educators learn the different concepts (“lenses”) through which to interpret everyday occurrences in classrooms, then a “mindfulness” emerges, to use Ellen Langer’s (1994) term. As a result, children’s cognitive structures develop “which select and categorize information, and serve as reference frames for thinking and acting” (Pepitone and Triandis, 1987, p. 481). In this way, a mindfulness to these concepts emerges both among the educators and the children—and the process of transmitting a very large cultural inheritance to the children is initiated.

With development as the aim of Jewish early childhood education, the focus is on the intersection between Judaism’s sociocultural inheritance and children. As mentioned above, this intersection is facilitated through concept formation. While young children may form only verbal labels in their minds of certain concepts, the groundwork is set for them to fill in these verbal labels with rich content through play and direct instruction later in school.

For the home and school to create a “conspiracy on behalf of children,” to use a common expression within the Yale Child Study Center’s School Development Program



(Comer et al., 1996), both the educators and family members need to learn not only the ideational content of these concepts. Educators and parents also need to learn how these concepts provide a rhythm to the week, month, and year. They also need to experience, along with the children, how everyday activities commonly considered to be secular may become laden with meaning when viewed through the lens of Jewish thought. Hence the importance of professional development for educators and parent education.

The key difference between Jewish early childhood education and Universal Pre-K is the implication of the educative process for the families. Even from the beginning of the rapid growth in early childhood programs in the United States following the close of World War I, children's play was not the only educational purpose of early childhood programs. During this period at the Yale Child Study Center, Arnold Gesell established a program that was to serve as a model. Gesell's articulation that children's behavior develops in a patterned way, through predictable stages (e.g., the "terrible twos") still resonates with many parents today. In 1924, Gesell wrote, "Should the nursery school become a thinly disguised day nursery for the custody of children, its future is doubtful." Rather, Gesell advocated that early childhood education should become "an educational adjunct to the home for the instruction and guidance of parents and ultimately for pre-parental training" (Ames, 1989, p. 134). The U.S. Economic Opportunities Act of 1964, which launched Head Start, was designed to help children overcome the deprivation caused by poverty. Josh Kagan (2002), New York University School of Law, explains that "Civil rights activists and academics united behind Head Start, both hoping that it would lead to some kind of reform of public education and involve parents more productively than typical public schools" (p. 517). For some schools, parents are

important to the extent that their involvement strengthens the education of the child. Parents are asked to help out in the classroom, serve on a PTO, or consulted when a problem arises with a child. While these can be warm and welcoming communities, their explicit agenda and approach does not focus on meeting the needs of parents. Other schools are family centered where the families, and not just the child, are viewed as part of the educational vision and goals. For example, a family centered school might provide to parents: learning and support on areas of interest or need and opportunities for building relationships and community with peers. Thus, the Jewish community, primarily due to concerns regarding continuity, views JECE as an effective leverage for involving parents in the life of the JECE program and thereby impact their engagement in Jewish life. For this reason, JECE schools may intentionally engage and facilitate the learning and growth of parents both as parents and as adults.

JECEI's work in the field demonstrates the importance of providing families with rich Jewish learning that challenges them intellectually and connects to their emotional lives as parents. Moreover, families benefit when JECE provides them with a sense that they are part of a community of Jewish families that learn and celebrate together and support each other in times of need. To this list, the Yale Child Study Center and JECEI would advocate that parents become partners in education. This is most effectively accomplished by developing governance and management structures that function well when family involvement is seen as far more than "something nice to do." Rather, parents as partners is at the core of the school enterprise. With effective governance and management structures, families become engaged in promoting the well-being of all the children in the school, and not just that of their own children. One such structure is the

School Planning and Management Team—an umbrella committee that coordinates all the initiatives bombarding the school, often with mutually-exclusive goals. The School Planning and Management Team is comprised of families, school administrators, educators, community representatives—and all those who have a stake in the life success of the children. The School Planning and Management Team and other school structures are described in Comer, Joyner, and Ben-Avie (2004).

Research and experience in educational and organization change point toward several key factors that are characteristic of successful change efforts. Through setting up governance and management structures to anticipate and manage change, the collective energies of JECE will not be diffused by putting out one fire after another. To make these governance and management structures function well, learning and development cannot be limited to only the children. Administrators, educators, and families need to change the way that they work and interact with one another. The governance and management structures will thereby change the underlying “operating system” of the JECE.

In this manner, the educators in Jewish early childhood programs build school communities characterized by healthy relationships, increased capacity to successfully promote children’s learning and development, and passion for Jewish life. The natural outcome of the commitment to creating community through healthy relationships is that families and educators collaborate to influence the lifepaths of the young children.

## **Outcomes**

We (Goodman, Schaap and Bidol-Padva) administered an inventory to parents who enrolled their children in JECE programs that were affiliated with either the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) or Project *Kavod* II, which focused on the

work conditions of Jewish early childhood educators. The two initiatives have different goals – JECEI is a long-term initiative that seeks to achieve excellence over a period of three or more years in a school and in a community. Project *Kavod II* was an innovative one-year initiative in the Greater Palm Beach area that engaged the hearts and minds of lay and professional leaders in a joint exploration of Jewish early childhood education. Both initiatives sought to better understand the identity, perceptions and characteristics of the parents of the children enrolled in the early childhood programs.

The online parent inventory was administered at 7 JECEI JECE programs (which had a response rate representing 79% of the families) and at 7 Project *Kavod II* JECE programs (which had a response rate representing 69% of the families). In total, 1,159 completed the parent inventory. On the inventory, the parents were provided with a list of possible reasons why families may enroll their children in JECE programs; they were asked to list their three most important criteria that they used when they selected their children's programs. One would assume that families who are not interested in transmitting the faith culture of the institution would not send their children to an institution that is incompatible with their beliefs. However, location, convenience, and cost are more frequently stated than faith-based beliefs. Hence the importance of exploring the reasons why parents enroll their children in Jewish early childhood education. On a 5-point scale, ranging from "Not at all important" to "Very important," the most important factor was the quality of the staff and educators (4.88). This criterion was closely followed by the quality of the child development program (4.77). Thus, the original selection criteria was driven by the families' search for an excellent early childhood education for their children.

To discern the Jewish-related criteria of the parents' selection criteria, they were provided with a list of "characteristics" they desired that their children would acquire as a result of enrolling their children in the programs. Jewish areas of learning and development were included in the list of criteria. The two top criteria were related to child development, and not Jewish life. They were the children's development of a strong sense of competence in their abilities as well as the development of strong social skills.

The parents' original selection criteria represented the families' priorities prior to enrolling their children in Jewish early childhood education. Also on the parent inventory there was a section in which the parents were presented with a list of Jewish actions (e.g., attend adult Jewish classes, celebrate Shabbat). They were asked to indicate how often their family participated in the following before and after enrolling their children in a Jewish early childhood program. The average rate of change was computed by averaging the differences of the scores observed over time (that is, the pre-test score was subtracted from the post-test score). The following two items had the greatest rate of change: "Read Jewish books or sing Jewish songs" (.69); and "Celebrate Shabbat" (.63). Among the Jewish parents in JECEI educational programs, there was a 28% increase in their participation in parent education programs after enrolling their children.

Does Jewish early childhood education impact the engagement of families in Jewish life? An analysis of the data indicates that this is indeed the case. The analyses also revealed that this is a far more complex process than simply intensifying the Judaic content of the educational program. The key factor is the level of excellence of the JECE program's underlying "operating system."

These statements are based on a series of data analyses. At the core of the parent inventory were 90 statements that addressed all aspects of Jewish early childhood education. The parents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements. There is a way to see whether patterns or themes (“factors”) emerge from the responses of the families to these statements (“Principal Component Factor Analysis”).

Five factors emerged:

- Selection Criteria (The considerations the families had when they made their original decision to enroll their children in Jewish early childhood education)
- Jewish Quality (Do the educators demonstrate high levels of quality in terms of their knowledge of Judaism? Do they foster a love of Judaism? Are they well-prepared to deepen the Jewish learning of the children?)
- Excellence (The quality rating that the families assign to different aspects of the JECE programs’ operations). The Excellence factor is comprised of such items as “[The JECE programs is] well planned and efficiently run” and “[The JECE programs] does a good job of preparing children for Kindergarten.”
- The families’ engagement in Jewish life PRIOR to enrolling their children in Jewish early childhood education.
- The families’ engagement in Jewish life AFTER enrolling their children in Jewish early childhood education.

Only Jewish families were included in the analysis. Also, an additional analysis confirmed that these factors were reliable and, therefore, could be used in further analyses. An analysis was conducted (“regression”) to see which factors would predict the AFTER level of engagement. Only two were found to be important predictors: The

first is not surprising: the PRIOR level of engagement. The second important predictor was Excellence. It is worth considering that the parents who rate that their children's JECE programs operate at a superb level are more open to enhancing their lives with Jewish connections. It is this willingness of families to expose themselves to unaccustomed experiences that marks the initiation of Jewish journeys.

In summary, for many parents the promotion of the children's Jewish identity is not an important criterion when choosing a-JECE program. However, if they perceive and experience the JECE programs as excellent and well-run, they will become more engaged in Jewish actions after they enroll their children as a "side effect." This finding has important consequences for how the Jewish community considers its investment and planning for these JECE programs. This finding aligns well with JECEI's premise that a long-term transformative change effort to improve early childhood programs in schools and communities will lead to the families' Jewish connectedness.

To confirm the finding that the families' ratings of the JECE programs' level of excellence predict, in part, their engagement in Jewish life after enrolling their children in JECE, the scores of the JECEI parents were compared with those of the Project *Kavod* II parents. JECEI's change model focuses on improving the underlying operating system of Jewish early childhood education in a way that Project *Kavod* II did not. The JECEI parents had higher ratings that were not due to chance on the extent to which the program influenced the Jewish part of themselves, the school climate, and the knowledge and skills of the teachers.

Moreover, when comparing the scores of the JECEI families both in-married (two Jews) and intermarried with the scores of the Project *Kavod* II families, the JECEI

families had significantly higher scores on the frequency of their participation in parent and adult Jewish education as well as the likelihood of enrolling intensively furthering their children's Jewish education through enrollment in a Israel experience and/or Jewish camp. They also showed interest in the possibility of enrolling their children in a Jewish day school. After enrolling their children in JECEI Jewish early childhood education, the predisposition of non-Jewish spouses to engage in Jewish life increases. JECEI has a way of reaching out to intermarried families, and it is effective.

These findings raised interesting questions for further probing. Thus, a new factor was developed comprised of all the statements in the section that measured the ways in which JECE programs potentially influence families. Once again, if we know the families' ratings of how well the JECE programs function, then we are able to predict how much the JECE programs will influence the families' Jewish connectedness. The most important predictor was the quality rating that the parents assigned to different aspects of the JECE programs' operations (Excellence). This was followed by the level of participation of the families in school-sponsored adult Jewish learning or parenting programs.

It is worthwhile to note in passing that the fathers and mothers associated with JECEI programs tended to have scores on the outcomes that were more similar than different. In only six outcomes were differences observed, and in all these cases the fathers tended to have significantly higher scores: Providing our family with a strong sense of meaning in our lives; Making us feel more comfortable participating in Jewish practice; Encouraging us to respect the potential of each person; Encouraging us to promote social justice; Encouraging us to be mensches (good people); and Read Jewish books or sing Jewish



songs (AFTER). These findings indicate that the JECEI programs are impacting the fathers as well as the mothers.

Throughout our lives, our understanding about how the world works and our place in the world entwine with our sense of our own emotional and behavioral capacity and habits, as well as with our sense of community (Ben-Avie, 2008). Developmental outcomes of the process of forging a strong relationship with a religious community are framed in terms of thoughts, emotions, actions, and partaking of community (especially through language). The first analysis that was conducted predicted the families' thoughts, emotions, ways of partaking of community—but especially their actions. The second also predicted the families' thoughts, emotions, actions—but especially the ways of partaking in the Jewish community. In both cases, the most important predictor dealt with how well the JECE programs function. These findings validate JECEI's approach to change: The most effective leverage for enhancing families' engagement in Jewish life is improving the underlying operating system of Jewish early childhood education.

### **Creating Excellence in Jewish Early Childhood Education: Standards for the Preparation of Qualified Educators**

The most important criterion that parents had when selecting their children's early childhood program was the quality of the staff and educators. One of the concerns from the Tufts study mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was the impact of the large number of educators with limited Jewish knowledge employed in Jewish early childhood education. All the studies on educators in JECE (Holtz, 1993; Vogelstein, 2002; Gamoron et al, 1995) noted the lack of professional training in education and/or Judaica. In-service training, while available to most early childhood professionals, was inadequate for addressing sustained change initiatives; the training focused on either Jewish content

or early childhood pedagogy. Finding qualified, skilled early childhood educators is difficult considering the low status and the low level of compensation. Finding professionals who are trained in early childhood development, skilled in current best practice, and who are knowledgeable about Jewish customs, practices, and traditions is extremely difficult—especially in smaller Jewish communities.

The aims of the Alliance for Jewish Early Education include the articulation of a global vision of excellent Jewish early childhood education and advocacy to establish professional and program standards of excellence. (The Alliance is open to any international, national, or communal organization addressing Jewish early childhood education.) The Alliance, therefore, raised the question of what knowledge, skills, and attitudes professionals entering the field of Jewish early childhood education should have? In order to address that problem the Alliance invited representatives from all the Jewish institutions of higher learning to discuss the feasibility of developing a common course for all professionals entering the field. The goal of The Alliance was to work collaboratively to ensure more early childhood professionals obtained a basic licensing requirement through the development of a course that would be transferable to any Jewish institution of higher learning and that met the entry-level requirements for professionals in Jewish early childhood education. It is important to note that in 2006 only two Jewish institutions of higher learning were offering courses that integrated Jewish content and values with early childhood development and pedagogy. For non-Jewish educators, in particular, this was a glaring need. So, too, among Jewish educators without a solid background in Judaism, especially how Judaism provides a rhythm to the day, week, month, and year.

The representatives from the seven institutions of higher learning developed an initiation course. The course was designed to explore the connection between early childhood settings and the broader Jewish community and the relationship between effective practice and one's own connection to Judaism. By consensus, the following learning objectives were agreed upon:

- Be familiar with current trends and practices regarding the integration of Judaic and General educational practices in Jewish early childhood programs (“blending”).
- Understand the principles behind high quality Jewish early childhood education programs and reflect on models of high quality Jewish early childhood programs.
- Identify and understand the network of relationships within the Jewish community that early childhood programs are a part of and brainstorm strategies for developing those relationships.
- To design educationally-purposeful environments and experiences that integrate Jewish concepts and content in routine activities that are commonly considered to be secular.

The course was conceived as a stepping stone to entering a degree program at an institution of higher education. In the Fall of 2008, the Board of Jewish Education of New York City offered the initiation course to new professionals. In Spring of 2009, the first Jewish CDA graduates received their certificates.

At the same time as the group was working on the common course, a parallel group was working on the standards for the number and type of credentials expected of early childhood Jewish educators. Up until that point, there was not a national organization that

was recognized by all Jewish communities as being responsible for licensing Jewish early childhood professionals. Moreover, there were not standards for the preparation of qualified educators in Jewish early childhood education.

The standards group created five levels to advocate for pay scales that reflect the educators' credential level. For example, Level 1 consists of 2 courses in Jewish Studies plus a Child Development Associates degree (CDA) or a Jewish CDA. Level 5 is a Masters in Jewish early childhood education or a MA in early childhood education with four graduate level courses in Jewish topics and four graduate level courses in early childhood education.

When we started, in 2001, there were approximately four national organizations or institutions addressing Jewish early childhood education (JECE). Today, there are twenty-three organizations in North America and Israel that address JECE in some way.

## **Conclusion**

Jewish early childhood education is at crossroads not only because of the introduction of Universal Pre-Kindergarten. As more and more States come up with “free” early childhood educational options in public schools, JECE programs will need to compete with them just to get people in the door. Therefore, quality is likely to be more of an issue, not less, in the coming years. The research presented in this chapter contributes to conversations about the significance of quality Jewish early childhood education for attracting Jewish families and the ability of JECE programs of excellence to serve as a gateway to Jewish life.

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