

DEVELOPING A NEW TRAINING MODEL TO MEET NEW CHALLENGES:

The BJE Jewish Family Educator Training Institute as a Case Study

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The Jewish Family Educator Training Institute, a two-year multi-faceted training program, has increased the ability of its graduates to effect change in their clients, their institutions, and themselves. The graduates' growth in skills, confidence, understanding and sensitivity to family dynamics, and Jewish knowledge was translated into more effective practice as Jewish family educators.

What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text they will never forget.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1967

As the value of Jewish family education became more and more obvious to the Jewish world, the need for personnel became a burning issue. In 1993 the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, to address the needs of the Jewish family, community, and the agencies that serve them, created the Jewish Family Educator (JFE) Training Institute. With the opportunity of carving out this innovative program, however, came salient questions. What body of knowledge is needed? What type of person should be practitioners? Was family education a separate field or was existing knowledge sufficient? Where does this new field most appropriately belong—in social work, education, or the rabbinate? Where should programming take place—in a synagogue, Jewish Community Center (JCC), school, agency, or new setting altogether?

Early studies done by the pioneers in fam-

ily education—the Whizin Institute at the University of Judaism and the Jewish Experiences for Families (J.E.F.F.) in Detroit—yielded several tentative answers to those questions (Bank, 1993; Bernard, 1991; Dashefsky & Bacon, 1997). As other programs continue to emerge, new studies appear (Wartenberg et al., 1997). These studies found that families were motivated to participate in family educational activities by the desire to find a quality family experience in a Jewish context and that these programs were successful in satisfying that desire. However, in terms of the goals of the educators, such as empowering families to lead more intensely Jewish lives in their own homes or to affiliate more actively in synagogues, the results were mixed. It seems that institutions are beginning to be changed by family education, but the impact of family education on the home remains a challenge.

The initial impetus for the JFE Training Institute came from the agencies that were committed to family education, but were finding a dearth of trained personnel, as well as from those who were practicing in the field but who felt the need for additional skills and training. Funding came from the Fund for

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All over the United States, and, indeed, in other countries, Jewish family education was populated by dedicated pioneers working in isolation, developing exciting and innovative programs but without any common language or assumptions. That this was an idea whose time had come was made clear by the fact that, in other areas of the country, three other such training programs were being developed concurrently. We were all on the frontier, the "Wild West" of the field.

We defined *Jewish family education* as the ongoing development of Jewish family life in which the family takes the responsibility for achieving and integrating Jewish practice, ritual, knowledge, and values into the fabric of their home life. Through Jewish family education, parents become empowered to realize their own strengths and skills as educators while serving as inspiring role models for their children. Such families come together to create Jewish communities.

GOALS OF THE JFE TRAINING INSTITUTE

The Institute had three goals:

1. to train Jewish communal workers, including educators, rabbis, and social workers, in the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness that will significantly improve their professional skills and effectiveness as family educators
2. to train participants to serve as advocates, initiators, and change agents of Jewish family education within their sponsoring institutions
3. to foster a network of professionals and mentors from among the graduates

In turn, we defined the goals for family educators as follows:

- to empower parents to become more effective Jewish role models and transmitters of Jewish knowledge, attitudes, values, and practices to their children, within the home and in the context of community
- to empower families of all types, including multigenerational and extended, to learn and to practice, independently and continuously, Jewish knowledge, values, concepts, and practices
- to sensitize colleagues and host institutions to focus attention and education on the whole family
- to develop and strengthen Jewish community life by forging bonding experiences among families
- to strengthen the family unit through Jewish learning, living, and practice

To determine to what degree these goals were being achieved, we built in an evaluation of the program with a baseline assessment by participants at the beginning and conclusion of the training. Ongoing oral individual and group evaluations and the comparative baseline assessment were augmented by the participants' written evaluations of each colloquium and academic course, the Institute as a whole at the completion of the program, and the Israel Seminar. For each of these components we constructed our own evaluation instruments.

BASIC COMPONENTS OF THE INSTITUTE

After a review of the literature and discussions with leading theoreticians and practitioners in the field, we determined that a Jewish family educator must be familiar with five basic academic areas: psychology, with an emphasis on child and adult development and family dynamics; Judaica, including a knowledge of customs, traditions, laws, and texts; management and organization, including the ability to administer programs, outreach, market, and work with boards; education, for effective planning and presenting of ideas and knowledge; and social work with an awareness of group processes and dynamics

and family systems. The program, which included academic work in these areas as well as practical components, evolved into the JFE Training Institute certificate in Jewish family education from Fordham University and the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York and recognized by the National Board of License. Its requirements included the completion of 12 to 15 graduate credits, group colloquia sessions, five to seven peer coaching visits and consultations, and a two-week program of study in Israel. Anything less, it was felt, would diminish from the rigor of the program; anything more would be excessive for a practice-based program with participants who are still functioning in their professional capacities.

The program thus provided an ongoing forum for the presentation of the latest developments in the field; interaction with leading thinkers and practitioners; and opportunities to develop skills, awareness, growth, collegiality, support and the exchange of ideas and resources. In addition, given the geographical realities of New York City, the ideological disparity of participants, and enormously varying educational venues, it was concluded that the program would have to be individualized.

The following brief description of each of the components of the training program also includes data and comments culled from elaborate evaluations completed by the participants at the conclusion of their training, as well as modifications that have been instituted over the course of the three years. These evaluations found that the three facets of the program deemed to be most valuable were the academic course work, the colloquia speakers, and the collegiality established.

Academic Program

Recognizing that participants come from a wide range of academic backgrounds and require different courses to complete their skills, the program was constructed to allow for individualized graduate-level study. Candidates completed 12 to 15 credits in those academic areas, delineated above, in which

they were lacking. The Institute's primary academic partner was Fordham University's Schools of Education and Social Services. The other participating institutions included, although were not limited to, the three religious seminaries—Hebrew Union College, Jewish Theological Seminary and Yeshiva University's Azrieli Institute for Education and Administration. Each participant's course of study was pre-approved by the Institute's academic advisor, the Coordinator of Special Projects for the Training Institute.

In their evaluations, participants rated the academic course work as one of the three most effective components of the Institute in that it filled in gaps in education, skills, and perspectives and was applicable to their professional work. Wrote one participant: "Since this program was designed for a variety of different professionals I was able to choose courses that I thought would be most helpful for me personally rather than having to follow a set curriculum.... I constantly refer back to what I've learned.... Without this Institute I never would have availed myself of this opportunity."

The institutions that the participants worked in received a \$1,000 stipend each year, which was mainly used to help their employees offset the academic costs. Some agencies, however, used it to supplement staff displacement each month when participants attended the colloquia. There were still some out-of-pocket academic expenses, which some participants found to be a difficulty.

Monthly Colloquia

The individualized nature of the academic program—for example, allowing a social worker with a weak Jewish background to take courses in Bible and history, or a rabbi to study family dynamics and group social work—was balanced by the requirement of monthly colloquia for all participants. Each month participants spent a full day together focusing on integrative topics related to Jewish family education. The monthly day-long colloquium formed the nexus of the Institute, for it allowed for sharing and application of

the collective experience, skills, and insight of participants. Each colloquium comprised a thirty-minute text study session, an hour's case study presentation and discussion, and four hours on a focused topic by a recognized expert in the field, sometimes an academic theoretician and sometimes a recognized practitioner.

The colloquia served an important integrative experience, as they were organized in a two-year curriculum toward the ultimate goal of creating Jewish family educators. Topics in the first year provided participants with an overview of the scope of the field, what is known about it, both in general and within Jewish family education, and the building blocks of the various disciplines of which this new field is comprised. The first year was instrumental, giving the learners the tools by which they can be successful in their work. Organization and management, knowledge of processes, contemporary family dynamics and issues, and peer coaching were important elements of the first year. The second year dealt more with content, as well as with some of the long-range goals of the enterprise itself. Table 1 lists some colloquia topics offered over the years. Exact topics offered within any two-year cycle depended on speaker availability.

The monthly colloquia were also deemed in the evaluations to be one of the three most helpful components of the Institute in that they provided valuable knowledge and facilitated the implementation of theory into practice. The initial evaluations indicated that participants would value an increase in interactive activities and program sharing, particularly time to process and apply the material. Toward that end, colloquia speakers were asked to incorporate time for processing and to provide practical application and interactive group activities.

Text Study

The study of primary Jewish sources, which involved the selection of texts relevant to the concerns of family education, served several purposes. Gaining knowledge of texts rel-

evant to Judaism's approach to the Jewish family was one benefit. It was useful for family educators to be conversant with those texts that address issues of family dynamics, such as sibling rivalry or parent-child relations. In addition, the study of traditional texts by members with varying backgrounds served as a paradigm of how a family might study together at a Shabbat table, for example. In the first few sessions of Year One, text study sessions were modeled by the staff, but subsequently were prepared and presented by the participants. In their evaluations, participants felt that the text study sessions were helpful for their insight, the material provided for family education, and as a model to use with families; participants also valued the acquisition of the skill of text study.

Case Study Presentations

The case study presentation and subsequent discussion enabled participants from different disciplines to share their perspectives and bring them to bear on specific issues. At each session participants took turns preparing and presenting a case study gleaned from their own professional work. Describing a program or issue and the particularly difficult challenges that it presented gave members the opportunity for reflective practice as they had to analyze and think through the family education issues as played out in their own settings. Members of the group then grappled with the issue, analyzing and offering their own insights and suggestions. The input of the group often enabled members to improve and further expand their programs. In both the text and case presentations there was ongoing consultation with the Institute directors in the course of preparation and development.

Case studies, participants reported, encouraged reflective practice and offered collegial support and practical advice. Some found a repetition of issues in the second year of training so participants were given the choice of describing and integrating into a colloquium theme a successful program that they instituted or presenting and applying

Table 1. Monthly Colloquia Topics, 1993-1997

- Families and Communities as Educators
- Storytelling and Drama for Jewish Family Education
- Administration and Organizational Theory Applied to Jewish Family Education
- Peer Coaching
- Designing Jewish Family Education: Research, Planning, and Evaluation
- How Do We Know How Well We Are Doing?
- Family Systems Theory and Collaborative Jewish Family Education
- Dealing with Diverse Types of Families
- Transferring Jewish Family Education to the Home
- Creating Worlds of Discovery for Families: Museums as a Setting for Family Education
- Transmitting Values through the Family: Creating Caring Jews
- Philosophy and Techniques of Outreach
- Program Development, Models, and Sharing
- Reflective Practice for Jewish Family Educators
- Faith Development and Jewish Family Education
- Jewish Spirituality for Families
- Developmental Issues in Jewish Family Education
- Adult Learning in the Context of Family Education
- Family Education Curriculum
- Jewish Family Education Curriculum
- Perspectives on Institutional Change and Jewish Family Education

material learned in an academic course.

Peer Coaching

Supervision, including observation, is a potent tool in professional development, particularly in an emerging field. Peer coaching, which involves the ability to critically observe, absorb, and assesses a peer's professional performance, promotes the capacity to set goals, develop action plans based on reflective thinking, and strengthen leadership abilities and skills. Under the guidance of a peer coaching expert, Institute participants were trained in data collection, observation within the context of a family education activity, and ways to structure and focus for reflection. The training took place in two colloquia sessions early in the first year, with a follow-up session at the year's end after participants had begun peer coaching. Periodic intervention and consultations with the expert were important as they refocused the group and provided opportunities to raise issues and problems that emerged from practice.

Participants were divided into pairs, balancing geography, skills, and professional

needs. They were expected to arrange their own meetings at alternating sites, with each serving as coach for the other in turn. At each pre-planning session they used the skills they had learned for pre-observation to establish goals for the visit. They recorded observation data in a log and did a post-visit analysis, and follow-up.

Peer coaching has been shown to make practitioners more willing to take risks, more reflective, more autonomous, and in general more effective. In addition, the very process of peer coaching served as a paradigm for families themselves in the creation of community. Families may already network and share, but this technique can give them a more structured approach to growth and change.

Participants enjoyed the opportunity to exchange programs and ideas, to evaluate successes and failures, to share resources, and, equally significant, to know that they were not alone.

Two-Week Israel Seminar

The Institute participants were trained to

reach out to families and empower them to become effective transmitters of Judaism. As a part of this training, they focused on those aspects of Judaism most essential to Jewish continuity—Torah, Shabbat, and Israel—and how they can be conveyed most effectively to families. The goal of the Institute's two-week intensive winter Israel seminar was to give Jewish family educators the tools to best help parents convey the value and love of Israel to their children. The seminar comprised study sessions and field trips specifically designed to inspire participants; deepen their understanding of Israel as a value and how that value has been transmitted through the ages; and teach them how to motivate families to visit or settle in Israel, plan programs for them when they get there, and use Israel as a resource for intensifying their Jewish commitment.

A critical and intrinsic part of the program was the requirement that participants incorporate at least one Israel-centered program into their ongoing work with families. Not only are these programs currently taking place but participants reported that, as a result of the Israel seminar, their work in Jewish family education deepened and improved.

The participants felt that the seminar was extremely valuable on many levels. The benefits were both personal and professional, and the seminar provided participants with a new perspective on Israel. One wrote that, "Experiencing Israel and Judaism from a multitude of perspectives... has enabled me to work with the wide variety of clients that I serve with a much greater degree of empathy, understanding, and acceptance."

Collegiality

One of the more exciting results of the training program was the development of a system of collegiality, networking, and support among the members in a field that has as yet few professionals. Participants were able to nurture a greater sense of security and gained encouragement to expand their goals and objectives. They discovered others who were grappling with similar challenges and

dilemmas and learned to take risks and to be innovative and reflective. Collegiality was rated the second most helpful aspect of the training program. During the third cycle of the Institute a retreat format was introduced to strengthen this aspect of the program while providing the context for two colloquia sessions. Participants particularly cited the benefits of intellectual stimulation; sharing of viewpoints, ideas, information, and resources; and encouragement and support from all collegiality opportunities. Although this response was not unanticipated, collegiality did not constitute one of the main objectives and goals in the formation of the Institute. It is a theme, however, that appears throughout the evaluations and encompasses the Israel Seminar, colloquia, and peer coaching. As one member commented, "The diversity of our group and the evolution of our group dynamics was an eye-opening educational experience. I hope that I can find other such productive group experiences."

So valued was the opportunity for sharing and growing that participants have formed a Jewish Family Educators' Network that has extended beyond graduation and includes members of all Institute classes.

SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

The program was intense and demanded a commitment and a serious desire for professional growth and effectiveness. As such, the selection of candidates was critical. From its inception, the Institute felt committed not only to providing a powerful training component but also to developing criteria for the selection of participants.

Based on interviews with practitioners and theoreticians in the field, it was determined that particular qualities were needed to succeed as a Jewish family educator. Academic and professional credentials are not enough. Essential personal qualities included a sense of caring, warmth, non-judgmental nature, and flexibility. Academically, the candidate needed strength in more than one of the five basic areas listed above, as well as a desire to add knowledge in those areas that

are lacking. A commitment to Jewish family education had to be evidenced by current work. Professional experience was a given. Participants had to be self-motivated and to view the training as a way of deepening their ability to function and achieve their goals, not merely as a means of career advancement. Each of their participating institutions had to support their enrollment in the program and provide whatever was necessary for participation, such as release time, approval, and support for family education. Participants were also carefully balanced in terms of setting, ideology, and regional location. As such, the participants spanned all ideologies from Orthodox through Reconstructionist and included school directors—both day and congregational, family educators, early childhood directors, social workers, congregational rabbis, congregational school teachers, cantors, a director of a training program for Jewish family educators, and a director of a Jewish retreat center. This diversity was appreciated by participants. One stated, “An important part of this experience was working with colleagues from all movements in the Jewish community. This experience in itself aided in the pursuit of peace within our community. We need more opportunities to interact and learn from one another.”

EVALUATION OF THE JFE TRAINING INSTITUTE

The overall data from the evaluations of all classes, as well as of individual participants, have validated the premises of the program. The first such premise is structure; namely, that knowledge and skills are acquired through a variety of venues. This may very well account for the success of this multi-layered program that addresses the different backgrounds, interests, settings, roles, and ideologies of its participants.

The second premise represents the very mission of the Training Institute—if family education is to have an impact, then family educators must be viewed as professionals who need specific skills and training, which, in turn, determines their capacity to effect

change. The ability to bring about change in the lives of their clients and their institutions is, ultimately, the barometer by which the success of a Jewish family educator is measured. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that, as a result of their training, their ability to effect change decidedly increased, specifically in three areas: their clients, their institutions, and themselves.

1. *Change in Clients:* Participants reported marked changes in client attitude and behavior as reflected in increased attendance, involvement, and requests for more programs, which in turn was translated into an increase in the number of programs, quality of programs, and new target populations. As one participant wrote, “I noticed a greater appreciation and understanding, on the part of families, of Jewish customs, rituals, and observances. They were enthusiastic and participated in the hands-on programs with wonder and a thirst for greater understanding. There was intense dialogue between parents and their children. A number of the parents shared their hopes of bringing the information and programs into their homes.” Wrote another, “I have had some... participants who expressed their appreciation for what they had gained in terms of increased knowledge and understanding which eventually resulted in a greater amount of Jewish practices, increased involvement with their Jewish community and Jewish life and most importantly—greater interest in learning about Judaism.”
2. *Change within Institutions:* As a result of the effect on clients and the increase in the quality and quantity of programming, participants noted a change within their institutions that was reflected in greater support and recognition, as well as more positive attitudes conveyed by lay boards and professional administrators and colleagues. This then translated into further programming opportunities. Participants indicated that their advice and leadership

were being sought in new and more powerful ways. They reported such results as almost daily consultations with the rabbi, more involvement in programming, and inclusion in much of the decision making. In short, colleagues and supervisors were soliciting their advice, opinions, and consultations on details of program planning and decision making.

3. *Change within Themselves:* One of the largest areas of growth was the perception of the participants regarding their own professional and personal abilities. They all reported a greater empowerment to effect change due to their growth in multiple areas—skills, confidence, an increase in credibility, a better understanding and sensitivity to family dynamics, and new ways of reaching families. Their own words are perhaps most telling:

I am able to bring my newly learned skills to bear in every area of my professional work with the result that I am a more effective facilitator, counselor, listener, organizer, and rabbi in general. I can even bring the skills to bear in interpersonal and family relations and in understanding my own feelings, motivations and behavior.

I focus more of my efforts in engaging the whole family together. I feel that I have more skills to offer the families in terms of how to effectuate change within their system.

I have a much better understanding of the meaning and execution of family programming, along with a better understanding of where families are coming from. This Training Institute has made me more sensitive to the needs, fears, and problems of families and...I am better able to meet or at least understand where they are coming from.

I am more knowledgeable and more aware of the various factors that affect family education programs. I feel confident working with families of various ages and make-ups in helping them to discover who they are and where they

want to go.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

We feel an obligation to share what we have learned and the challenges we recognize for those who will continue this important work. Our conclusions are not limited to the training of Jewish family educators but serve as a general model for developing other types of training programs.

- Although very diverse in their backgrounds, professional settings, and ideological affiliations, the participants learned to successfully negotiate their differences and develop a respect for each other. Members repeatedly mentioned this growth as well as the support from and bonding with each other that they experienced. Many developed professional and personal relationships with each other that extended beyond program requirements.
- A great deal of flexibility is needed in administering a program whose participants are all professionals with ongoing demands and responsibilities. In fact, some participants required extensions beyond the two years to complete all requirements. For some, even this time period was not long enough. Evaluations, both oral and written, are very valuable vehicles for modifying and adapting the program as it proceeds.
- Participants need help to translate theory into practical applications within their individual settings.
- One of the areas of struggle was to find time, within the limits of each colloquium, to present content and still allow for translation of that content into practical applications and group sharing.

Challenges

The challenges that face Jewish family educators are formidable, and critical questions remain unanswered. Will family education become a field unto itself or an educational specialization? Will institutions re-

gard family education as a foremost priority and major responsibility of key staff? Will family education become transformative within institutions or a minor department within them? Will family education training become one more skill added to a professional or a full-time profession?

Additionally, obtaining funding in today's era of fiscal constraints is difficult. Designing programs, requirements, and objectives for a fledgling field with personnel who are often already overworked requires a combination of reality and rigor. Sensitizing institutions that are overextended and understaffed to enlarge their perspective, their programming, and their staff demands dedication and tenacity. The alternative, however, is unthinkable. A 52 percent rate of intermarriage and with only 28 percent of children of those marriages being raised as Jews requires that we empower families to learn and to live as Jews, enable parents to become more effective transmitters of the Jewish heritage and values to their own children, and forge shared experiences among families to build and strengthen communities.

To meet these challenges trained family education leaders with vision and with the ability to transform institutions are essential. Leadership training must be ongoing, with the recruitment of new candidates and the preparation of additional mentors, as well as the provision of opportunities for continued

professional growth and networking. The Board of Jewish Education's Jewish Family Educator Training Institute is one pioneering mode in a field that must begin to echo within Jewish families and Jewish communities everywhere.

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