

Where Have All The Teachers Gone by Sheila Silverberg and Margie Zeskind

Sheila's thoughts: My mother's words as I once pondered how to best use my "first-generation college experience" to make a better life for myself still ring in my ears. Mom said, "You have the choice of becoming a teacher or a nurse. Then, once you're married, you'll always have an occupation to fall back on if you ever need to work!" In the late 1950s, my mother's words of wisdom were the same words heard by many young women of my generation. We followed the well-meaning advice of our elders and ultimately filled the schools with a new wave of teachers.

Margie's thoughts: In the early 70s, my mother emphatically directed me away from the fields of education and nursing toward a career that would enable me to become self-supporting. As the main support in our family, she had struggled to make ends meet as both a nurse and an educator. A potentially lucrative career would enable me, her daughter, to become financially independent. With her best wishes in mind, I directed my university studies to a career in medicine and have often pondered how it happened that I ultimately ended up as an early childhood educator! Yet, the tide was already turning in a direction that led many young women away from the limited career options that had previously guided their predecessors toward entering a career in education.

Good News and Bad News

Early childhood programs have become a major player in the educational continuum. The present state of our early childhood system contains both the proverbial "good news and bad news." On the very positive side, young Jewish children are definitely filling the classrooms of early childhood programs in South Florida. Much like their counterparts in communities throughout the country, they spend many hours during their important developmental years in classrooms housed in synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and day schools. Furthermore, they're starting younger than ever, arriving earlier each day and leaving later, to meet the needs of parents with busy professional careers and personal lives. So who are the caregivers we are entrusting to nurture and educate our Jewish future?

Quality caregivers/educators to staff our Jewish early childhood programs are becoming scarce. That is the "bad news." Approximately thirty years ago, the mothers of young children, many elementary school educators on indefinite "motherhood leave," worked in the fledgling half-day Jewish early childhood programs. Salaries, poor at best, were not necessarily the main focus. In some cases, the salaries supplemented the family income. The job of teaching in these nurturing environments, in spite of low salaries and a lack of benefits, provided a sense of camaraderie and professional fulfillment for many of the educators.

Today, the recruitment of quality educators has become a totally different story. Credentialed educators are not willing or financially able to work for salaries that are minimal, at best. This is especially true in demographic regions where early childhood educators are required to enter the field with a master's degree. Cheryl Meskin, Director of the Early Childhood Department of the BJE of Greater New York states, "Times have changed. Women have many more lucrative professional opportunities. Most of my daughter's friends are investment bankers, business executives, doctors, and lawyers." (This quote, and further details of the career choices younger women are now making can be found in Cheryl Meskin's article on page 59.) Meskin cites these salaries as a major reason why young people are moving in career directions away from education

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Many credentialed teachers, already invested in early childhood, are attracted to the higher salaries offered by public schools. Significantly higher salaries coupled with benefit packages, are a major reason why educators are leaving our Jewish early childhood programs. This phenomenon has created an incredible shortage of qualified early childhood professionals. The inequity of salaries must be addressed. Enhanced professional status, adequate financial compensation, and benefits are required to turn the tide, bringing qualified educators back to Jewish early childhood classrooms.

South Florida Considerations

In South Florida, there are additional situations that we are currently addressing. Unlike our counterparts in New York and other localities with similar standards, educators in our Jewish early childhood programs are not required to have a college degree. While degreed educators are highly recommended, the reality is that some lead educators have degrees (in education or other fields) and some do not. Educators supporting lead teachers (assistants) are seldom degreed. Many have the Child Development Associate Equivalency certificate and all are required to fulfill the 40-hour Children and Family Services state requirement. The current low compensation scale, non-existent benefits, and lack of professional status have made it increasingly difficult to attract educators with degrees. Of additional importance is the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to attract educators that are Jewish to our Jewish early childhood programs! Many of our nurturing educators are receiving on-site training in Jewish curriculum, the very essence of what we deliver.

In South Florida, we have come up with an exciting “initiative” that we believe will attract a number of young people to the Jewish early childhood field in our demographic area and, eventually, other localities as well. The Judaic High School Early Childhood Initiative, a new “pilot program” for the currently existing school, is coordinated by the Judaic High School Department at the Central Agency for Jewish Education in Miami and offers high school students wishing to continue their Jewish education an opportunity to receive college credits for coursework selected from topics of interest. They join with their peers to attend classes one night a week, completing four semesters of college credit over a period of two years.

Students were recruited for the early childhood initiative from the population already attending, or planning to attend, the Judaic High School program. Margie Zeskind, the grant recipient and director of the Helene and A.B. Wiener Early Childhood Dept. at the Miami Central Agency for Jewish Education, met with students and described the initiative, presenting it as a new course option, a new “track.” A brochure was also sent to all students on the Judaic High School mailing list at the Central Agency.

Carefully Designed Content

The Judaic High School Early Childhood Initiative includes four college courses. The foundation for the curriculum content meets Miami-Dade Community College curriculum requirements. The carefully designed content takes into account each student’s knowledge of Judaism and the cycle of the Jewish year. It provides the methodology enabling them to practically apply this knowledge to early childhood pedagogy. The adjunct professors are early childhood directors who have taught in Jewish programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Four early childhood courses are required to complete this program. Students receive college credits through Miami-Dade Community College. Upon completion of the four courses, the students receive their Florida State 40-hour certificates. The modules included in the coursework that fulfill the requirements for the 40-hour certificates include: physical child abuse, sexual abuse, anti-bias/multi-cultural rules and regulations, and observation and assessment. Once the student reaches the age of 18, he or she can apply to the college to receive a Child Development Associate Equivalency Certificate.

Two highly motivated groups of high school students, coming from differing backgrounds, have entered the program. The first group, meeting at Beth Torah Adath Yeshurun (BTAY), one evening a week in North Miami Beach, began their coursework in September 2000. These students are a heterogeneous group representing different elements of the Jewish community. They meet in one of the functioning early childhood classroom in the Conservative synagogue in North Miami Beach. Students use the physical setting, materials, and creations of the children as a teaching tool.

Adjunct Professor Stephanie Oshinsky noted how excited the students were after viewing a video on room arrangement. Offering both approval and suggestions for enhancement, they assessed the spaces within their classroom. Children's creative work, ever changing and evolving, was critically examined to determine "ages and stages" following a session on human growth and development. To quote Professor Oshinsky, "The early childhood environment gives meaning to what is being studied."

The World of Early Childhood

The second group of students, meeting at Bais Yaakov, an Orthodox school for girls, began their coursework in January 2001. They come from a homogeneous religious community. Guided through the coursework by Adjunct Professor Sharon Levine, these students have embarked on an adventure into the world of early childhood. They have studied early childhood from an historical perspective, becoming enlightened about those who have had a large impact on how we educate young children today. They have explored child development, learning about what is similar with children as a group and what is unique to the individual. Coming from sizable families, they have long been exposed to children of all ages. Now, after just one semester in the program, they are focusing on their siblings with "different eyes." To quote Professor Levine, "It is both delightful and inspiring to work with these Bais Yaakov students who demonstrate a serious commitment, attending this class after the long hours of their regular day." An additional requirement for both groups of students is that they spend time in an early childhood program.

The BTAY students use neighboring programs in addition to the facility used for coursework. Each time they go into a program, they are observing different aspects of the program. Sometimes the focus is on positive guidance; at other times, it might be on pro-social behaviors. The course content under discussion provides the focus area.

The Bais Yaakov students have been going, as a group, to Toras Emes Academy, an Orthodox synagogue in North Miami Beach that houses an early childhood program. To quote Professor Levine, "Toras Emes has welcomed the girls and offers an outstanding example of an environment which addresses the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of young children. Our visits to the school provide the girls with opportunities to observe master teachers and to interact with the children."

Bringing a Fresh Perspective

As the end of the second semester nears, Oshinsky shared some of her personal thoughts. "I'm so amazed with the enthusiasm shown by the high school students in my Judaic High School Early Childhood class. They bring a fresh perspective to each topic area and demonstrate their unbelievable capacity to learn. Teaching them at this pivotal time in their lives, prior to college, has given them a direction to consider. They are actually expressing a desire to ultimately work professionally with young children in one capacity or another." Likewise, Professor Levine added her thoughts, "Toras Emes, Bais Yaakov and The Helene and A.B. Wiener Early Childhood Department at the Central Agency for Jewish Education are to be commended on this joint venture of preparing the next generation of early childhood educators."

As for the Bais Yaakov students, the majority will go on to a seminary program after graduation. Some will then go on to college. Others will become teachers in an early childhood classroom. Many are likely to eventually have large families of their own. With the Judaic High School Early Childhood Initiative, we are giving them the tools that they will need to be nurturing and effective caregivers.

Making a Difference in Career Choices

As the first year winds down, we are looking forward to following the progress of the students already enrolled in the program. We are also planning the "recruitment process" for the new classes to begin in the fall. The students currently involved will be part of that process as they bring their passion for what they have learned to the new crop of Judaic High School prospects. Once again quoting Professor Oshinsky, "This experience, extending over the course of two school semesters, has been a real eye-opener for me! These young people have been inspirational. They want to make it a better world for young children. I believe that they will do just that."

We want to believe that the Judaic High School Early Childhood Initiative will make a difference in the future career choices of Jewish students. If they become impassioned with the importance of the early years when they are young, perhaps they will join the early childhood work force. If not, perhaps they will choose a profession that involves working with children. And, if all else fails, perhaps they will become the knowledgeable philanthropists who give financial support to issues and programs that relate to our young Jewish children.

The idea for this program was conceived and developed in the Helene and A.B. Wiener Early Childhood Department at the Central Agency for Jewish Education in Miami and is funded through a generous grant from the Covenant Foundation. This initiative is made available through the collaborative efforts of the Judaic High School Department and the Early Childhood Department at the Central Agency for Jewish Education in Greater Miami. The Judaic High School Department has an existing 25-year-old relationship with Miami-Dade Community College to provide Jewish high school students with an opportunity to earn college credit while furthering their Jewish education.

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