

HOW JEWISH DAY SCHOOL TEACHERS PERCEIVE SCHOOL CONDITIONS

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Introduction

Schools play a critical part in shaping teachers' roles and effectiveness. As many educational researchers have observed, however, schools often provide an isolating environment that does not encourage professional growth (Lortie, 1975). Yet, we know from decades of research that schools can help teachers deepen their understanding of teaching and learning and develop their practice when they provide a supportive and collaborative environment (Little, 1987; 2002; McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

In this report, we examine day school teachers' perceptions of the professional culture and working conditions in their schools. To what extent do teachers receive various types of support from the head of school, the administration, colleagues, parents and the school community at large? We also report on day school teachers' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their working conditions.

This report builds on an earlier study, *DeLeT Alumni Survey: A Comprehensive Report on the Journey of Beginning Jewish Day School Teachers* (Tamir et al., 2010). Based on data from cohorts 1-4 of the DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) program, the study reported on Delet graduates' educational and religious backgrounds, motivations, and perceptions of their teacher preparation and teaching experience. Like its predecessor, the study reported here builds on a similar survey, but it draws on responses from a broader sample of teachers in order to provide a more diverse picture of teachers' experiences in Jewish day schools.

The report includes graduates from four programs. Three prepare teachers for Jewish day schools—Stern College for Women, the Jewish Theological Seminary and the DeLeT programs at Brandeis University and The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. One – the Jewish New Teacher Project—provides mentoring to new teachers during their first year of teaching in Jewish day schools. This diverse set of programs helped us reach teachers in Jewish day schools of varied sizes and sectors around the country.

Description of Survey and Respondents

The survey distributed to alumni from the four programs was based on a survey that has been given bi-annually to graduates of the Brandeis and HUC Delet programs as part of the DeLeT Longitudinal Study since 2007. The questions cover a range of topics, including information about respondents' professional experiences in schools, their teaching practices, their satisfaction with aspects of school culture, and their future plans. The survey targets respondents who are currently teaching as well as those who taught in previous years but were not teaching in a day school at the time the survey was administered.

In this report, we focus on responses to survey questions that shed light on the way teachers experience their school's organizational setting, conditions and resources, and the professional culture in which they work. More specifically, we analyzed responses related to three sets of questions: What kinds of support did teachers receive during their first year of

teaching? What opportunities do teachers have for ongoing professional growth? How satisfied are teachers with the leadership and culture of their school?

A total of 329 teachers completed the survey of which 257 (78.2%) were female and 72 (21.8%) were male. Two hundred and sixteen (65.6%) respondents were currently teaching in Jewish day schools at the time of the survey and 113 (34.4%) were former teachers who were not teaching at that time. Almost 40% of the respondents were certified to teach in public schools. The average age of the respondents was 33 and almost half were married or in a committed relationship (42.5%). Finally, the sample of teachers was diverse in terms of religious denomination with 42 respondents identifying as Orthodox, 90 identifying as Modern Orthodox, 11 identifying as Conservadox, 80 identifying as Conservative, 42 identifying as reform and 30 identifying as reconstructionist, renewal or cultural.

Guidance and Support During the First Year of Teaching

One set of questions focused on Jewish day school teachers' experiences during their first year of teaching. Teachers were asked, "In your first year of teaching, did you participate in a teacher induction program?" 44% of teachers responded that they had. In addition, teachers were asked, "Did you receive the following kinds of support during your first year of teaching?" followed by a list of six possible kinds of support. All of these questions were framed as "yes" or "no" questions. The types of support are common strategies that schools use to help novice teachers. Except for the last item, they are also opportunities for professional development. For example, "ongoing guidance or feedback from a master or mentor teacher" can help teachers understand the school's expectations and reduce anxiety while also helping teachers improve their practice.

Table 1: Types of support available for beginning teachers

Kind of support	Teachers receiving this support in first year
Regular supportive communication with your principal, other administrators, or department chair	60%
Ongoing guidance or feedback from a master or mentor teacher	60%
Common planning time with teachers in your subject	50%
Seminars or classes for beginning teachers	29%
Reduced teaching schedule or number of preparations	28%
Extra classroom assistance (e.g., teacher aides)	25%

The first four items involve ongoing, job-embedded learning opportunities. A moderately high percentage of teachers (60%) reported engaging in *regular supportive communication* with an administrator and receiving *ongoing guidance or feedback from a master or mentor teacher*. These types of induction, the former a form of support and the latter a form of professional development, are considered effective (particularly in retaining teachers) according to numerous studies on teacher induction (e.g., Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In addition, half of the respondents had *common planning time* with other teachers who shared their content area. Collaboration with other teachers who teach the same content, particularly if those other teachers have expertise, can be an important source of professional guidance and learning for new teachers who often feel unsure about what content to teach and/or how best to teach it to their particular students. *Seminars or classes for beginning teachers* can be another source of guidance for new teachers, but are typically not embedded in the school and can be less directly related to the daily work of teaching. Slightly less than a third (29%) of the respondents participated in this type of professional learning during their first year of teaching.

Two strategies that are relatively more costly, although known to ease the challenges of beginning teaching, are reducing the *teaching schedule or number of preparations* and providing *extra classroom assistance*. Less than a third of respondents (28%) experienced a reduction in their teaching load and exactly one quarter (25%) had extra assistance in the classroom. These two strategies may provide assistance without necessarily contributing to new teachers' development.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Support and Guidance

Another set of questions asked about the usefulness of the guidance and support teachers reported to have received from their schools later in their careers. Specifically, current teachers were asked, "In the past 12 months, in which of the following activities have you

participated and how useful were these activities to you?”¹ Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of the activities in which they had participated on a 4 point Likert scale (1=not useful, 2=somewhat useful, 3= useful and 4=very useful).

Table 2. Usefulness of and participation in types of professional development

Activity	Usefulness rating (means)	Teachers participating in this activity
Regularly-scheduled collaboration with other teachers on issues of instruction	3.33	50%
Mentoring and/or peer observation and/or coaching as part of a formal arrangement	3.20	36%
Observational visits to other schools	3.19	23%
Individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally	3.16	31%
Attending workshops, conferences or trainings	3.02	56%
Presenting at workshops, conferences or trainings	3.02	19%
University courses	2.96	15%
Participating in a network of teachers (e.g., one organized by an outside agency/program or over the internet)	2.94	30%
Working informally to bring about change in your school	2.92	45%

It is not surprising that the four types of professional development that teachers tended to rate as useful or very useful were directly connected to the work of teaching. The two most highly rated forms of development both involved ongoing collaboration. Fifty percent of teachers participated in what was considered the most useful type, *regularly-scheduled collaboration with other teachers on issues of instruction* and 36% of teachers participated in *mentoring and/or peer observation and/or coaching as part of a formal arrangement*. Two other types of professional development that were rated highly by teachers include *observational visits to other schools*, in which less than a quarter of teachers (23%) engaged and *individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally*, in which slightly less than a third of teachers (31%) engaged. Both types of professional development meet the needs of mid-career teachers for autonomy and choice.

Schools have long relied on “one-shot workshops” to provide professional development for teachers, but research shows that this form of professional development rarely facilitates teachers’ learning and professional growth (e.g., Wong, 2004). It is therefore unsurprising that the most common type of professional development was *attending workshops, conferences or trainings*. More than half of all the teachers surveyed (56%) indicated that they participated in

¹ Program graduates who left teaching responded to a similarly worded question, but were asked to refer to their last year in teaching.

this kind of professional development. On average, teachers rated this professional development as useful, but less useful than long-term, professional learning opportunities built into the school day. *Presenting at workshops, conferences or trainings* was also rated, on average, as useful, but far fewer respondents, only one in five (19%) participated in this type of professional development.

These three types of professional development ranked lowest in terms of usefulness, although they still had means close to 3.0 which indicates that most respondents found them relatively useful. The participation level in these lowest three varied. Only 15% of respondents participated in *university courses* and 30% *participated in a network of teachers*. Both types of development tend to be external to schools. In addition, 45% of surveyed teachers reported that they *worked informally to bring about change in their schools*. The survey does not reveal whether teachers believed this change work was useful to their teaching practice or useful because it led to positive changes in the school.

School Climate and Culture

A third set of questions used a set of 17 prompts to assess the climate and professional culture of the respondents' schools. Respondents were asked "Please use the following scale to indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements about your current school." Respondents used a five point Likert scale with the following ratings: 1=I do not agree at all, 2=I slightly agree, 3= I somewhat agree, 4=I very much agree, 5= I completely agree. Sixteen of the statements have been grouped into three categories.² Within each category they are ordered from highest to lowest agreement and percentages by rating level are provided.

School-Wide Beliefs and Actions. The first category includes three statements about the school's mission and vision of good teaching (see Table 4 for the statements and teacher responses). Recent studies show that when a school's mission is widely shared among teachers, it promotes a sense of belonging among the faculty and helps motivate student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004). Other studies in teacher education have shown that developing a shared vision of good teaching promotes professional growth among beginning teachers (Darling, Hammond and Bransford, 2005).

The first two statements concern the extent to which teachers feel clear about the vision of the school, both in terms of the kind of teaching valued and the school's Jewish mission. Agreement tended to be mixed for both of these statements with about half of the respondents agreeing that teachers in their schools very much or completely share *a vision of good teaching and a language for talking about it* (50.4%) and *an understanding of the school's Jewish mission* (48.8%).

The third statement, *there is a gap between what the school stands for and what it does*, indicates teachers' perceptions about the extent to which schools enact their beliefs. In this case, the

² One statement that involves teachers' perspectives on administrators is grouped with the following section.

lower the mean, the more positively teachers perceive the schools' actions to be aligned with their philosophy. A clear majority of teachers (64%) either did not agree or only slightly agreed that this gap existed. This suggests that a majority of the teachers had positive perceptions of their schools in terms of the alignment between mission and actions.

Table 3: Teachers' perspectives on school-wide beliefs and actions

Statement	Mean rating	Percent by rating level		
		1-2	3	4-5
Teachers share a vision of good teaching and a language for talking about it	3.41	18.2%	31.4%	50.4%
Teachers share an understanding of the school's Jewish mission	3.31	20.2%	30.1%	48.8%
There is a gap between what the school stands for and what it does	2.24	64.8%	19.3%	16%

Professional Culture. While school-wide beliefs and the actions that align with them are a foundational aspect of school climate and culture, another important facet is the opportunity for teachers to participate in a growth-oriented, collaborative professional culture. The next four statements, listed in Table 4, provide information about teachers' perspectives on various dimensions related to the professional culture of their schools.

Table 4: Teachers' perspectives on professional culture

Statement	Mean rating	Percent by rating level		
		1-2	3	4-5
Teachers have regular opportunities for professional development	3.15	29.2%	26.7%	44.2%
Teachers have regular times to meet with colleagues to work on issues regarding teaching/learning	3.05	31.9%	29%	39%
My school takes the needs of beginning teachers seriously	3.03	36.7%	22.8%	40.5%
I am pleased with the opportunities for professional advancement (promotion) offered to educators at my school	2.53	50%	28.2%	21.9%

The first three statements garnered moderate to low levels of agreement. All involved specific references about the ways that schools support the professional development needs of teachers. Less than half of the surveyed teachers very much or completely agreed that *teachers have regular opportunities for professional development* (44.2%), *teachers have regular times to meet with colleagues to work on issues regarding teaching/ learning* (39%), and *my school takes the needs of*

beginning teachers seriously (40.5%). The survey revealed that slightly more than one fifth of the day school teachers very much or completely agreed that their schools offered sufficient *opportunities for professional advancement (promotion)* (21.9%). This statement garnered the lowest level of agreement in this survey's section, which indicates an area of challenge and potential reform.

Satisfaction with Context. Schools strive to retain teachers and teachers' sense of satisfaction influences their decisions about staying or leaving (Johnson & Birkeland, 2004). Satisfaction with the professional climate and culture is one important factor, yet there are other school factors that influence teacher satisfaction. The following six statements provide a window into respondents' sense of satisfaction with a range of aspects of their school contexts. These statements assess the teachers' feelings about basic aspects of school life such as class size, facilities, and materials as well as aspects that are more abstract, such as feeling appreciated for their approach to teaching (for details, see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Teachers' satisfaction with school context

Statement	Mean rating	Percent by rating level		
		1-2	3	4-5
I feel that my school appreciates and supports my approach to teaching.	3.75	14.4%	19.5%	66.1%
I am satisfied with my class size(s).	3.70	13%	20.1%	67%
Teachers have adequate curricular resources and materials.	3.48	15.9%	32.9%	51.3%
The school's physical facility adequately supports the instructional program.	3.39	23.9%	22.6%	53.6%
I am satisfied with the policies and practices for assigning students to classes or sections for instruction.	3.19	25.6%	31.3%	43%
Teachers are not unduly burdened with paperwork and non-instructional responsibilities.	3.05	31.3%	30.8%	38%

This sub-category produced the two highest levels of agreement within this section. Approximately two thirds of the teachers very much or completely agreed that the schools *appreciated and supported my approach to teaching* (66.1%). Illuminating a completely different dimension, teachers also were *satisfied with class size(s)* (67%). Other dimensions that received significantly lower levels of agreement include teachers' mixed sense of satisfaction with materials and facilities. Approximately half of the respondents very much or completely agreed that *teachers have adequate curricular resources and materials* (51.3%) and that *the school's physical facility adequately supports the instructional program* (53.6%). While 67% of teachers were satisfied with class size, considerably fewer were *satisfied with the policies and practices for assigning students to classes or sections for instruction* (43%). This indicates that while teachers may accept

the size of their classes, they would like more influence on the ways that students are assigned to those classes. Finally, only a moderate number of teachers very much or completely agreed with the statement *teachers are not unduly burdened with paperwork and non-instructional responsibilities* (38%). This suggests that many day school teachers are asked to serve in multiple roles both formal and informal and to carry out significant, time consuming tasks associated with these extra roles.

Perspectives on School Administration

Teachers' professional lives are strongly influenced by school leadership. A fourth question used a set of seven prompts to understand teachers' perspectives regarding school administration. The question asked "Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school administrator(s)." For this set of prompts respondents used the following five point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree. One prompt that was originally grouped with the prompts from the previous section is included in the table below because it taps respondents' perspectives on administrators (see table 6 for a list of the eight statements).

Table 6: Teachers' perspectives on school administration

Statement	Mean rating	Percent by rating level		
		1	3	4-5
I can usually count on my school administration to provide me with the freedom to do a good job	4.04	9%	9.4%	81.6%
I can usually count on my administration to support me in my relationship with parents	3.99	11.4%	9.4%	79.1%
I can usually count on my administration to appreciate my best efforts	3.95	10.2%	13.9%	76%
Administrators support and value teachers' work ³	3.74	12.1%	23.4%	64.5%
My school administration provides a sense of direction for instruction in the school	3.58	17.3%	23%	59.8%
My school administration seeks teacher input on decisions directly affecting curriculum or instruction	3.55	18.9%	21.8%	59.2%
The school administration usually follows through on discipline problems that I bring to their attention	3.45	17.7%	28.9%	53.3%
I consider the administration in my school effective	3.44	19.6%	25.3%	55.1%

Teachers often value autonomy, though it may work against developing a collaborative culture and a sense of shared responsibility for student learning. As we see, a strong majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I can usually count on my school administration to provide me with the freedom to do a good job* (81.6%). This suggests that most teachers felt their administrators do not interfere with their classroom teaching responsibilities in unproductive ways. Yet, as Jewish day schools tend to have a highly educated and involved parent body, day school teachers frequently need support and welcome the intervention of administrators in their relationships with parents. Teachers rated school administrators highly for this aspect of their work. Indeed, a majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I can usually count on my administration to support me in my relationship with parents* (79.1%).

Two of the statements involved the teachers' sense of being appreciated or valued by administrators. Approximately three quarters of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that *I can usually count on my administration to appreciate my best efforts* (76%) and nearly two thirds very much or completely agreed that *Administrators support and value teachers' work* (64.5%). This suggests that a majority of teachers in the survey felt generally appreciated or valued by the administration at their school. Somewhat fewer teachers agreed or strongly agreed that *school administration seeks teacher input on decisions directly affecting curriculum or instruction* (59.2%). One way that administrators demonstrate their valuing of teachers is by seeking their input on

³ This statement was rated using a slightly different Likert scale than the others in this table: 1=I do not agree at all, 2=I slightly agree, 3= I somewhat agree, 4=I very much agree, 5= I completely agree.

decisions that affect them. It is interesting that teachers rated this specific item less favorably than the more general items.

School administrators are often seen as instructional leaders, although this may vary across schools and depend on the level of administration - head of school, department chair or principal. Less than two thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *my school administration provides a sense of direction for instruction in the school* (59.8). Another key role that administrators play is that of providing support for discipline issues. A slight majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *the school administration usually follows through on discipline problems that I bring to their attention* (53.5%). Perhaps it is due to these two more moderate levels of agreement that only a slight majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that *I consider the administration in my school effective* (55.1%). This indicates that while teachers may appreciate the freedom to do their job well, there are other aspects of an administrator's role that teachers seem to value more when evaluating an administrator's overall effectiveness.

Implications for Conditions in Jewish Day Schools

A mixed picture emerges from the data described above about teachers' experiences in Jewish day schools. Overall, teachers' perspectives are positive, yet there is clearly room for improvement. Teachers seem to feel most positive about their relationships with their administrators and have a general sense of being appreciated and supported. However, we note a concerning gap between the relatively strong satisfaction teachers feel toward school administration and the weak response they give to critical indicators related to productive professional cultures in school.⁴

Every beginning teacher deserves ongoing support and guidance. Induction and mentoring are not just for struggling teachers, but are widely regarded in the U.S. and OECD countries as a basic condition for launching a successful teaching career. Yet, in the many Jewish day schools sampled for this report, less than half of all teachers say they participated in a formal induction program while a similar percentage of teachers believes that their schools take the learning needs of new teachers seriously. Jewish day schools would do well to evaluate their induction system and scrutinize the structures and supports they have in place to guide beginning teachers and promote their professional development.⁵

Along with attending to the learning needs of new teachers, Jewish day schools should also pay attention to the ways they support the learning needs of all teachers. Just as beginning teachers require specialized and ongoing support, all teachers need continued opportunities to work with colleagues to improve teaching and learning in their school. This can be a particular challenge in small day schools, where there is only one teacher for a particular

⁴ For a discussion of this conundrum, see Birkeland & Tamir, 2012.

⁵ For a set of on-line resources to use in new teacher development, see www.teacherlearning.org, a project of the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.

grade or content area. Given that this kind of collaborative work rated highest in terms of usefulness, Jewish day schools may need to think critically and creatively about how they are funding and promoting productive collaborative structures and how they could strengthen the effectiveness of collaborative networks across schools.

Finally, a striking finding that emerged is the lack of professional advancement opportunities for Jewish day school teachers. Most teachers who responded to the survey represent a particularly committed group of Jewish education professionals. Those who attended DeLeT, the Davidson School of Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary or Stern College all specifically chose the field of Jewish education and are driven by a strong sense of mission and purpose. In order to capitalize on the commitments and capacities that these teachers bring, Jewish day schools must provide opportunities for teachers to advance while continuing to serve as Jewish day school educators.

Conclusions

Jewish day schools would benefit from providing more formal and informal professional learning opportunities, particularly opportunities that are ongoing and job-embedded. This report provides evidence that teachers find these opportunities valuable in keeping with the broader education literature. While such professional development opportunities are available in some schools, making them more widely available may have a significant impact on the satisfaction, practice and retention of Jewish day school educators.

Focusing on developing a collaborative culture may also provide leadership opportunities for experienced teachers who seek expanded responsibilities while remaining full or part time in the classroom. In other words, building a collaborative culture can not only advance professional learning, it also offers leadership opportunities to mid-career and veteran teachers seeking new meaning and challenge in their work. For example, such teachers can play key roles in mentoring new teachers, leading teacher study groups, facilitating peer coaching. But this may require administrators to invest less in outside experts and workshops and more in transforming accomplished teachers into instructional leaders.

This survey of day school teachers paints an uneven picture of those conditions in Jewish day schools that directly affect teacher satisfaction, learning and retention. Decades of research provide a useful picture of the kinds of working conditions and learning opportunities that teachers at different career stages value. While some of these conditions and opportunities exist in some Jewish day schools, there is considerable room for improvement.

These findings do not only speak directly to day school leaders. They also speak to organizations and individuals engaged in training and coaching various categories of day school leaders, including heads of school, principals, department chairs, division heads, mentor teachers, teacher leaders. People who fill these roles all have some direct responsibility for the ongoing growth and development of day school teachers. The more

day schools become good places for teacher learning, the more likely they are to succeed in providing a strong and effective education to students.

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