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Multi-age Grouping in Religious School: Can it Work?

With Jewish continuity being a major concern in the Jewish community today, it has come to be accepted based on various studies that Congregational Education is not the most effective type of Jewish education in promoting Jewish continuity (Cohen 261). Children are frequently disengaged while they are in Religious School, and Religious School does not promote living a vibrant Jewish life, and in fact may lead students away from Jewish life – Jewish children whose only Jewish education is one day a week Religious School have a higher chance of intermarrying (Cohen 279). Many educators and administrators recognize the lack of effectiveness and engagement of Religious School, and are attempting to make improvements at various levels. There are nationwide efforts, such as the Experiment in Congregational Education, which seek to create learning in all aspects of the synagogue. On a local level, the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education has its Re-imagine program, helping synagogues revisit their educational goals and then meet these goals. Individual synagogues are also making their own efforts to improve their schools.

One thing that synagogues are doing as they try to improve congregational education is looking at education models in the Jewish community that are successful – especially camps and youth groups, and they see what elements of these they might be able to bring into the Religious School. One example of this is grouping multiple ages of students together. This is something that in the past, has been unique to these types of informal Jewish education, and while it might be impossible to bring some elements into Congregational Education, such as the time or intensity involved, this is something that it is possible to bring into the Congregational School.

Educators may hope that this will bring in a greater sense of community that might be found more often in camps and youth groups. In youth groups and junior youth groups, three or four grades of students are together at a time. At camp, units are frequently made up of two grades. Can multi-age grouping work in Religious School the way it works in camp or the way it works in multiple primary schools throughout the country – making this form of Jewish education more effective in preserving Jewish continuity?

There are a variety of elements that lead multi-age grouping to succeed at Jewish summer camps. First of all, camp is designed to create and promote community. Participants are in a close knit setting, for a consecutive period of time. There is a high level of isolation. Between all of these characteristics, a strong community can be built. Campers are with their same multi-age group all the time – they live together, have programming together, and eat meals together. This multi-age group is just another part of the larger community of which they are a part. Even if there is a range of maturity levels within the group, campers may find and spend their time with other campers who are in a similar level, and the gap is never so great that campers at various levels cannot work together. Much of the curriculum can be opinion and discussion based, because in these forms of Jewish education, it is not necessary to “teach to the test” – the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Because it can be discussion based, everyone has something different to contribute. Another thing about the curriculum is that it changes from summer to summer. At Goldman Union Camp Institute, there is a new educational theme each summer – it may be text based, values based, history based, or come from a multitude of other ideas. The campers are never learning the same material from summer to summer. One summer, they might learn Pirkei Avot, the next, they might learn lessons taken from the biblical story of Joseph. These different elements which create an environment in which multi-age grouping is effective do not exist in

Religious School. First of all, Religious School has a much smaller amount of time and isolation is nearly non-existent. Even if a Religious School includes multi-age grouping to try to make each grade more aware of the community it is in, by grouping it with the grade above and the grade below on alternate years, the students are only together for a few hours a week. This is not enough to create anything close to the strength of the community created by camp. Religious schools also may not have the option of changing the curriculum so drastically from year to year like a camp can do. Because of this concern of preparing a student for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, there might be more requirements about what the students must learn. However, to accommodate two grade levels, the curriculum must change at least partially from year to year. When there is not a multi-age grouping, a 3rd grade teacher may be able to use the same curriculum from year to year. However, the teacher of a class of 3rd and 4th graders must have a curriculum that lasts two years, since they will have each grade of students for two years. It also must be a curriculum that is neither consecutive nor cumulative, since alternating grades will learn Year A and Year B of the curriculum in either their first or second year with this same teacher.

However, many elementary schools use multi-grade groups successfully. What makes these multi-age groups work successfully, and is it a possibility for Religious Schools? One reason why multi-age groups were established in regular schools is because they can be more focused on the child's development, rather on specific curriculum, because they are less curriculum-focused. As a scholar of education, Boss put it, "multi-age settings are designed to cater to students' developmental needs, not help them score higher on state tests" (Boss). Many schools who once used multi-age groups instead of regular grades have changed back to regular grades because this multi-age format is unable to teach appropriately for state required tests (Boss). While Religious Schools do not ideally want to be teaching just for the "Bar Mitzvah"

test, the importance lies with the curriculum being covered, rather than the concern with child's developmental level. It seems that Religious schools are not necessarily concerned with students' individual needs, but are actually concerned with the long term needs of the greater Jewish community: Jewish continuity. However, this appears to be contradictory, because by focusing on the long term, students are being lost in the short term.

Another way the multi-age setting caters to the student is that by spending time with the same students for two years, the teacher can more appropriately assess and teach to the needs of the student. Day and public school teachers spend five days a week with their students, and are more able to thoroughly know their students and do individual work with them. However, in Religious School, teachers are only with their students once a week for a couple of hours, and cannot assess their students in the same manner. They also may not have the capacity to create solutions for each student's individual needs.

Within the Jewish community, there exist many camps with multi-age groups, youth groups, early childhood schools with multi-age groups and even some day schools with multi-age groupings. There are very few congregational one day a week Religious Schools experimenting with this concept, but they do exist. One very large Reform congregation in the Los Angeles area has turned to this model this year, in its efforts to improve its Religious School program. However, it has been met with very mixed reviews. Teachers did not feel adequately prepared to teach two grades at once. Even though they were given an entirely new curriculum to work with, teachers struggled because they did not know what their students had learned in previous years. Teaching Hebrew to such a varied group is also a difficulty, and as this is the first year of this multi-age program, there is concern about next year, when students who were paired with younger kids will then be paired with older kids. Students can also be frustrated. For

example, the younger students in each class feel overwhelmed by the older students, and the older students feel dragged down by the younger students. Students were recently asked to offer suggestions for next year's program, and suggested taking away the multi-grade aspect of the program. However, this is only the first year of this multi-age system, and it may take time to make all of the necessary adjustments for it to be successful. On the other hand, what will be the cost? Will more students be failed by the congregational education system while the kinks are worked out of a new program?

Because multi-age groups are still few and far between in Religious Schools, it is hard to tell if using this method will make advances in achieving better success from congregational education. At first glance, it would appear that Religious Schools do not have the appropriate combination of elements to create a successful multi-age grouped program that can meet the needs of the students and the teachers. However, it may be worth experimenting with as educators and administrators try to create more successful congregational education programs.

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