REFLECTIONS

ON EDUCATION & LEARNING

Bnei Akiva Schools

BNEI AKIVA SCHOOLS
YESHIVAT OR CHAIM • ULPANAT OROT

אֵיזֶהוּ חָכָם? הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם. אֵיזֶהוּ מְכֻבָּד? הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת

WHO IS WISE? HE WHO LEARNS FROM EVERY PERSON. WHO IS HE THAT IS HONOURED? HE WHO HONOURS HIS FELLOW.

Jonathan Parker
Assistant Principal & Director of Education

AS I WRITE THIS, I AM HEADING INTO MY final seminar for the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI, 2023). It has been a two-year journey of professional development with Jewish educators from around the world (rabbis, heads of schools, administrators, department heads, and more), all of whom share a passion for growing the capacity of their faculty. The institute is administered and taught by university professors from across North America, and targets improving Jewish education in measurable ways. While there are a host of approaches and ideas covered over the course of the two years, the principle that most speaks to me as a professional educator is "teachers learn and learners teach."

The teaching model colloquially known as "Sage on the Stage" has been passé for more than 30 years, long ago replaced by the "Guide on the Side" approach (King, 1993). In the information age, we've come to recognize that because all information is freely available, the role of good educators is to teach students how to find and make use of accurate information. Students no longer need teachers to impart wisdom, so much as they need us to teach them how to identify what is truly wise, and how to best make use of that knowledge. This shift gave rise to the Flipped Classroom model (The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, 2023), the Khan Academy (2023), and I would argue even the fall of mainstream media and rise of social media and podcast culture. However, all of these models stop short of giving students autonomy over the actual direction of their learning, allowing the learners

to teach and teachers to learn. This model still forces teachers to set the goals and articulate the vision, and although students have some limited freedom in how they approach that vision, at the end of the day the teacher is entirely in the driver's seat, whether as Sage or Guide.

The principle of "teachers learn and learners teach" is not new; indeed, we famously find it in the Gemara (Ta'anit 7a) when Rabbi Chanina says "הַרְבֵּה לָמַדְתִּי מֵרַבּוֹתַי, וּמֵחֲבֵירַי "יוֹתֵר מֵרַבּוֹתַי, וּמִתַּלְמִידַי יוֹתֵר מִכּוּלָּן" (" Much have I learned from my rabbis, even more have I learned from my colleagues, but from my students I have learned more than from anyone else"). At MTEI this lesson was driven home in multiple ways, from the structured study of classical Jewish texts, to seminars on Design Thinking in Education (Linke, 2017), but for me personally the most resonant application of this principle was in a practice called Group Level Understanding (GLU; Raider-Roth et al., 2019). The premise of the GLU, as described by the authors of the linked article, is "to focus on helping a community assess the state of a particular issue (such as homelessness, substance abuse, suicide prevention, children's health disparities) and create action steps to address the issue." As practiced at MTEI, and now at Bnei Akiva Schools, the GLU has the following steps:

1. Identify a central question.
2. Break the question into component pieces, each on a separate bristol board.
3. Faculty/Students circulate around the room, writing their responses to prompts on the boards.
4. Faculty/Students circulate around the room a second time, putting check-marks next to each response with which they agree.
5. The bristol boards are taken down, and as a group of faculty/students we look for themes within the responses.
6. These themes form the basis for answers to the central question, as well as action steps to take toward resolving the central question.
7. After a set term (in our case a school year), we return as a group to re-evaluate the central question. Did we successfully resolve the concern? If not, what should we try differently? If so, what is a new question worthy of tackling?
8. Repeat!

This crowd-sourcing/crowd-analysis of ideas allows everyone in the room, regardless of age, experience, or discipline to participate in the conversation as equals. One participant mentioned to me that he thought "won't the GLU just be full of complaints?", to which I responded that on the contrary, the GLU "would allow every voice to be heard." It is the antidote to the contemporary silos of thought and fragmentation of community. Instead of conversing only with people with whom you already agree on topics deemed "safe", the entire group is privy to the responses of every other member of the diverse group on a wide range of topics. Unlike most social media, which filter what you see to what you are likely to agree with, the GLU forces you to write—and read!—a variety of opinions.

On the next page is a summary of the GLUs run at Bnei Akiva Schools last year:

SUMMARY OF GLU ACTIVITIES RUN IN BAS IN 2023

STEP	OR CHAIM STUDENTS	BAS FACULTY
Central Concern	How can the school build a more positive culture?	What are steps that we —the school administration and faculty—can take to improve the school?
Prompts (a few examples)	• As a YOC student I'm proud of… • The best thing about YOC is… • The top thing missing at YOC is… • To improve YOC we should… • When I think about Israel I feel… • Regarding cell phones, the school should… • I feel most intellectually challenged when… • I'd participate in more extracurricular Judaic Studies learning if… • To me, the word "Yeshiva" means… • Ivrit education at YOC is… • My biggest challenge is… • One issue no-one talks about is… • I feel most supported when… • If the school had a new slogan it should be…	• What do you think about extra credit assignments? • How should schools react to ChatGPT and AI? • What can the school do to encourage a culture of learning within the faculty? • What are some ways to give positive reinforcement for good behaviour? • How can the school better inculcate good values? • What differences between UO and YOC are driven by gender? • How is teaching boys different from teaching girls? • What should the school do to better support new teachers? • How can the school better support shlichim? • As a BAS faculty member I'm most proud of… • The top thing missing at BAS is… • My biggest professional challenge is… • My biggest professional challenge is… • I feel most supported when… • One school-related issue nobody talks about is…
Themes Identified by Students and Faculty (drawn from individual answers to above prompts)	• Community • Identity • Positive reinforcement • Differences between students • Incentives • Religiosity	• Increasing positive and negative feedback; modelling and Mussar to effect behavioural change. • Time and money • Collaboration and communication with colleagues • Diversity and Tolerance— Differentiation and Recognition • Responsibility - Work Ethic and Parental oversight
Action Items	• Kodesh Credits to reward optional learning • Positive Student Reporter • Rosh Chodesh Assemblies • Incremental approach to the cell-phone policy • Bnei Akiva running a weekly club	• New program to focus on shaliach teacher-training and acculturation • New topics for Professional Learning Communities (including AI in Schools) • Continuation of the school's coaching program for untenured faculty • Updated guidance about positive feedback, parent-teacher communication • Weekly opportunities for faculty to share feedback with administrators

I think it goes without saying (but will write it anyway), that the takeaways from these two GLUs are potentially transformative for the institution, and it all came from giving everyone in the building a chance to be heard in a structured way. From *middot*, to learning, to policy, there is no area of the function of the school on which the stakeholders did not have an opportunity to share, and thereby shape, the school. It was the embodiment of teachers learning and learners teaching. Items that are now embedded in school culture—like new clubs and the structure of the cell-phone plan—grew from student-responses, and the same can be said for the coaching of *shlichim* and increased used of positive feedback from the staff. We will of course need to return to the action items at the end of the school year to evaluate our progress and tweak the implementation, but this sort of reflection and change is a natural component of all learning and growth (known most prominently as Action Research [SAGE, n.d.]).
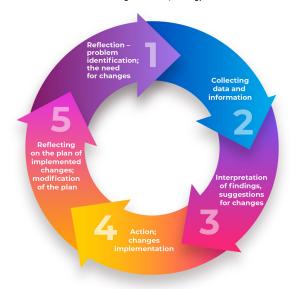

Figure 1: The Action Research Process (Accord, n.d.).

As my students are well-aware, I never miss a chance to tie things back to the mission of the school. Two central elements of BAS' Mission Statement are:

1. To create a Yeshiva environment where religiously committed Jewish boys and girls will be able to grow intellectually, socially, emotionally and religiously in a vibrant Jewish setting.

1. To offer a dual curriculum of Jewish and General Studies that will arm our students with the methodological tools needed to become self-reliant in classical Jewish texts and give them a broad-based secular grounding in the classical world disciplines. (Bnei Akiva Schools, n.d.)

Central to the GLU process are the goals of **growth** and **methodologies for self-reliance**. Not only did we actively encourage both, but we showed the students that every voice matters, and every voice needs to be accounted for in building a caring community. Without students and staff sharing their own views and commenting on the views of others, then looking at the totality of responses in order to identify themes, we would not have Kodesh Credits to reward extracurricular Jewish Studies learning, monthly assemblies to celebrate *middot*, increased feedback opportunities for faculty, or a new slate of PLCs. Although there are myriad other examples from the school day and year, in my experience at Bnei Akiva Schools no other single activity has so highlighted our hope of being "so much more than a school." Beyond this, I think the GLU (and my time with the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute), also drive home the point that everyone at BAS, from student to teacher to administrator to parent, benefits from a commitment to lifelong learning. Whether it is in a classroom, from a podcast, or in a professional development opportunity, the importance of learning from—and honouring— every person cannot be overstated. ■

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