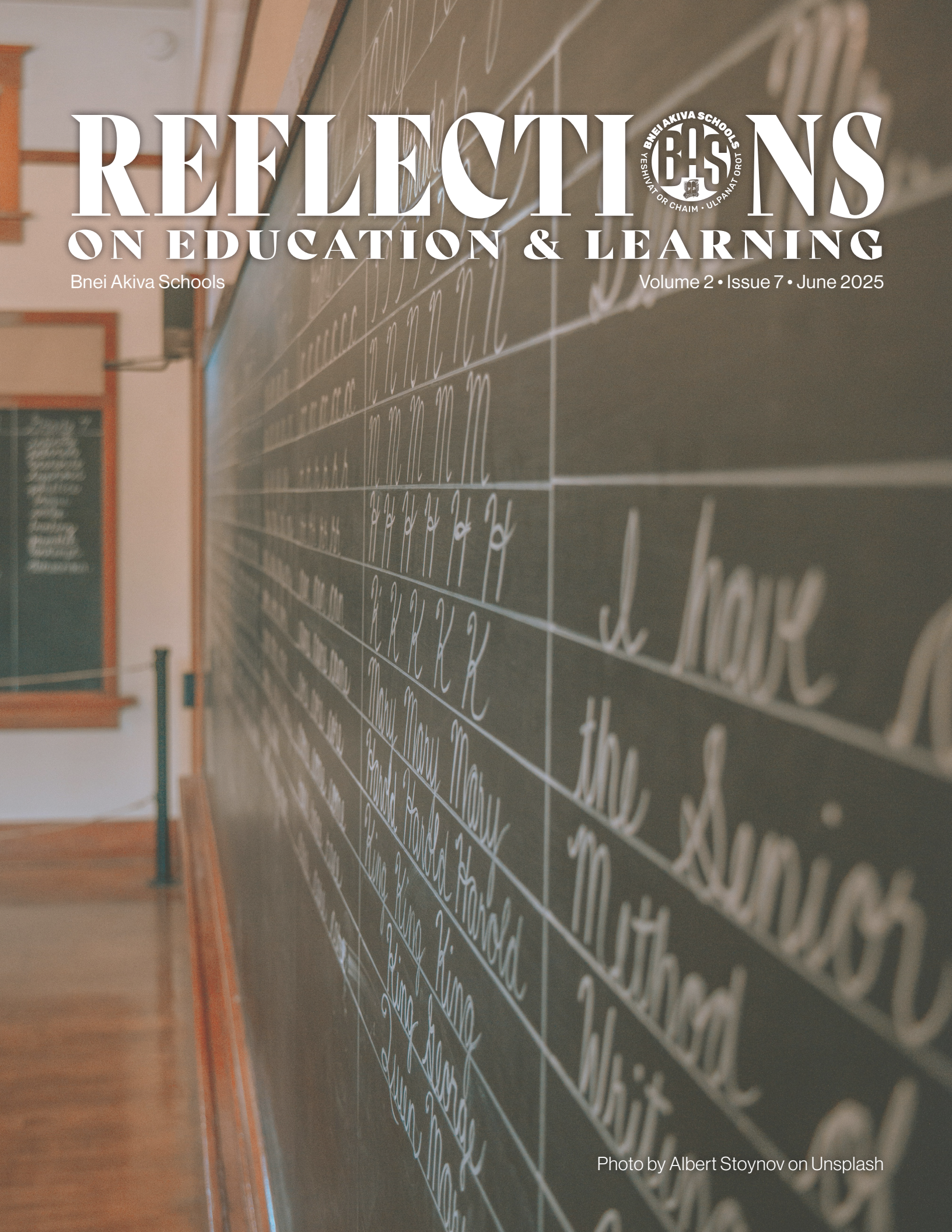
REFLECTIONS
ON EDUCATION & LEARNING

Bnei Akiva Schools

Volume 2 • Issue 7 • June 2025



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TRANSFORMATION THROUGH OBSERVATION

Jonathan Parker
Assistant Principal and Director of Education

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE CLICHE THAT "those who can, do, and those who can't, teach," but we all innately know that this isn't accurate. Like many fields, there is more to education than simply transferring knowledge from one brain to another; if that was all there is to it, schools would have disappeared around the time of Shakespeare, when grammar school became mandatory under Queen Elizabeth I and nearly-universal basic literacy ensued. A better description of the role of a teacher comes from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l, in *From Optimism to Hope* (2024):

> Teachers open our eyes to the world. They give us curiosity and confidence. They teach us to ask questions. They connect us to our past and future. They're the guardians of our social heritage. We have lots of heroes today—sportsmen, supermodels, media personalities. They come, they have their fifteen minutes of fame, and they go. But the influence of good teachers stays with us. They are the people who really shape our life. (132)

But how does one train a person to this level of ability? No offense intended to the many wonderful teachers' colleges out there, but can two years of pedagogy and observation turn a young adult into a shaper of lives? Obviously not.

In "A Lesson is Like a Swiftly Flowing River" (*American Educator,* Winter 1998),

Catherine Lewis and Ineko Tsuchida describe the Japanese practice of *kenkyuu jungyou*, a method of research study of lessons, as "central to individual, schoolwide, and even national improvement of teaching." As noted above, the goal of this practice is to shift from "teaching as telling" to "teaching for understanding." The methodology for engaging in this transformative practice is straightforward:

1. **A lesson is carefully planned.** This means that learning goals and success criteria are clearly delineated, and the activities to reach those goals are chosen with intent. The creation of the lesson is often done in collaboration with a large group of peer-teachers.

2. **The lesson is either recorded or observed.** The peer-teachers who engaged in the creation of the lesson all come together to watch one member of the group deliver the class. This is either done in real time, with teachers in the room interacting with the students while the lesson takes place, or by having the lesson recorded, transcribed, and watched after-the-fact.

3. **The lesson is discussed.** The peer-teachers who created and observed the lesson come together to discuss what they saw. Were the learning goals met? Why or why not? Which activities worked and which needed more work? Were all the students engaged? If some weren't, how could we have better reached them?

Lewis and Tsuchida noted a variety of positive impacts from teachers using the Lesson Study model. First and foremost is the improvement of teacher practice, from the planning of a lesson through its implementation, and ending with reflection. This practice also emboldens teachers to experiment and try new approaches, both because their peers suggest them and because they see these practices in action. Lesson Studies force teachers to collaborate in meaningful ways targeted at student-growth, but does this without any feelings of punitive action that could accompany an administrator observing a lesson; this is a group of peers coming together because they all want to be the best teachers they can be. To mirror Rabbi Sacks' words, teachers who engage in Lesson Study do so because they want to open students' eyes, encourage questions, and shape the future. This is evident in their commitment to lifelong learning, something they model for their students in real time through the Lesson Study framework.

Bnei Akiva Schools has a robust coaching program for all pre-tenure faculty, but we recognized several years ago that our *shlichim* (Israeli educators seconded to the school for two to four years) were underserved by this program. Coaching at BAS was structured around improving trained teachers as they approached tenure, to make sure they were achieving all they'd learned to do in school. *Shlichim*, on the other hand, are rarely trained in Canadian teaching methodologies, are not working toward tenure, and sometimes do not have the curriculum at the core of their lessons because they are more focused on a love and respect for Israel and Judaism at the core of their work (as opposed to textual knowledge or skill). In the words of the Jewish Agency (n.d.), "[*shlichim*] provide a living connection to Israel by promoting Israeli experiences, facilitating

Jewish social activism, and speaking authentically about faith and culture." Two years ago we embarked on a process of monthly Lesson Study with our *shlichim*, as well as a few other interested teachers.

Our process is as follows: during the opening Faculty Meeting before the start of the school year, all of us gather together to review the process, as well as the appropriate formatting of lesson plans. Every lesson plan must have specific goals and ways to measure them, an opening hook ("set induction"), a series of linked activities that speak to different learning styles, and a conclusion that comes along with an informal assessment of what students learned in that class. As a team we choose who will be first to present (somehow it always ends up being me), and that person is responsible to create a lesson and invite the rest of us to view the plan. We spend the next two weeks commenting on the lesson and addressing those concerns, and then join together in the presenter's classroom to observe the lesson. While the lesson is taking place we make notes, and then compile the notes into the chart below (I've included a sample from one of the lessons):

Questions about the lesson	Observations that lead to these questions	Resolution
Was the goal appropriate for the lesson?	The goal (learning about the holiday) took a very small amount of the time of the lesson. Most of the lesson was used for the discussion and the presentations. Would the goal be better off being something else?	• Goal of the course is "survival." Nobody will let Jared stop. • Goal is to interest the students. Only a semestered class. Up next is "*Twilight Zone* Torah." For that class, the goal will be to go over a targeted dilemma/ theme.
Did you have a backup plan?	C on the lesson plan was a discussion about the need of the holiday. It didn't seem to be going too well (I guess they are all anti-feminists) until the teachers (luckily) fired things up. Did you have a back up plan just in case they wouldn't be able to generate a discussion (as actually was the case), or did you just hope for the best?	• Nope. Thank God for Avishai and Esther. • Content is less important than the phrasing of the question. Needs to be grounded in experiences they have had personally (e.g. *Mitvot she'hazman grama)*. • Talk to Anna Urowitz Freudenstein

Using computers in class	On one hand most of the girls were doing the work they were requested to do (research, present, fill out form on other presentations) in the time that they were allowed computers, but some girls were also using it for other things. Should computers be avoided at all costs, or is this worth the price?	• Computers for research are good.
		• For discussions, consider a ban?
		  • Use a protocol, or assessment afterwards to make sure the girls are paying attention to others.
		  • Fishbowl protocol, Four Corners

Late arrival didn't get an assignment, then did		Base the conversation on the materials in front of them, not on what they missed (e.g. sourcesheet)

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At the next faculty meeting, the team spends 45 minutes together discussing the lesson and highlighting areas we liked and areas that need improvement. We then choose the next presenter, and start the cycle again.

One of the biggest benefits of the Lesson Study model is that it takes teachers out of their comfort-zone—their own classrooms—and forces them to think carefully about a colleague's lesson plan and teaching style. This leads into detailed and important conversations about what makes good lessons, and how to encourage student growth and deep-learning. Rather than focusing solely on the content of a course, which one tends to do with his/her own class, this model breaks you out of your box and into a more reflective space. My favorite moments are when a teacher observing a lesson sees a student who is struggling in his own class succeeding in someone else's, thereby gaining insight into exactly the sort of transformations that Rabbi Sacks wants teachers to strive for. The model also creates a safe space for experimentation, because you have a room full of peers rooting for you to succeed at your job, leaving you free to grow as a professional. As one of last year's participants remarked,

> It was good to see other teachers at action, their teaching styles, and how they coped with different situations. That provided room for thought and learning from others. It also "forced" me to spend more time on creating lesson plans (both mine, and seeing others). This was helpful in shifting into a mind-set of preparing the actual class (and not just arriving to class knowing the material), thinking of different methods of getting the

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students engaged, setting learning goals and preparing methods of evaluation for success criteria. It was nice to see classes taking place, without the pressure of teaching. This allowed me to view what was going on (and learn from it) more in depth, which is usually not possible when teaching a class. It was also nice to see that other teachers need to deal with things that happen to me in class. It's not only me (צרת רבים—חצי נחמה). Lastly, it gave us as a group something to do together (the viewing and PLCs) and joke about. That helped with creating an environment of mutual experiences and socializing.

This teacher's perspective captures all of the elements of good teaching identified by Rabbi Sacks—curiosity, confidence, questioning, connection and positive influence—and notes how they were achieved through the Lesson Study model. It is a potentially transformative method of professional learning and development. The Mission Statement of Bnei Akiva Schools articulates that we strive "to create a Yeshiva environment where religiously committed boys and girls will be able to grow intellectually, socially, emotionally and religiously in a vibrant Jewish setting," and the Lesson Study methodology shows that this is the case not only for the students, but for the faculty as well! ■

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