

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION & LEARNING



Bnei Akiva Schools

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RELATIONAL LEARNING

THE KEY TO GOOD EDUCATION



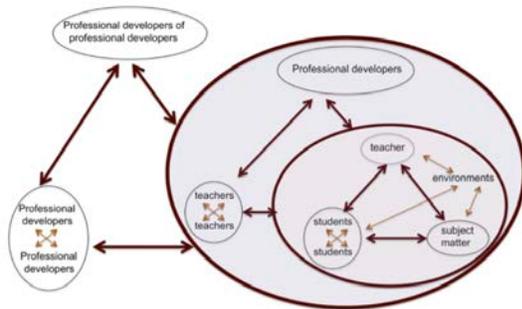
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At the student orientation at Ulpanat Orot this year, I remarked to the girls that this would be my first time in more than 20 years teaching in an all-girls school. In fact, members of that class from two decades ago now have sons I teach at the boys' campus. For the last eight years I've been fully immersed in the world of all-boys education at Or Chaim, and I wondered if I was prepared to transition back to working at both campuses. However, after a few weeks back at school, I was certain that although there are demonstrable trends in the different ways boys and girls learn best, there are also certain fundamental elements that make for sound education. My return to Ulpana has helped me to solidify my philosophy of education and to examine what I believe universally underpins good teaching and learning: increasing teacher capacity to manage relationships with students and content.

In 1974, David Hawkins¹ proposed a three-part model of teaching-learning relationships, which others have since reframed as the "Instructional Triangle" or "Relational Triangle". He explained that the teacher, student, and text (subject) all exist in a relationship with one another, and that all three elements must remain balanced for sound education to take place. If undue stress is put on the student-teacher relationship, then the class could be exclusively about socialization; too much emphasis on the teacher's relationship with the text could easily lead to the content being inaccessible to the students; and highlighting the connection of the student and the text will leave the class unmoored from academic standards. Think of it this way - if the focus of a class is on the student-teacher relationship, all they will do is talk and connect, which is wonderful, but does not advance the curriculum. If the focus is on

¹Hawkins, David (1974). In: *The Informed Vision: Essays on Learning and Human Nature*. New York: Agathon Press. 48-62

the teacher-text relationship, the class will be extremely high-level, probably out of reach for most students. And if the focus is on the student-text relationship, there will be no analysis or authentic understanding, only personal reflections. All three pieces must be balanced in a thoughtful way to maximize the impact of the class and school. According to this model, the crux of good education is identifying and exploring the relationships between these three elements.



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Understood this way, a school as a whole, and classrooms in particular, must find a balance between the teacher, the students, and the content. The circles surrounding the teachers, students, and texts are the contexts in which those relationships occur. Learning and teaching are always informed by their context; in the case of Bnei Akiva Schools the context includes Modern Orthodoxy, Toronto, Canada, etc.

The reason that this model is sometimes referred to as the “Relational Triangle” is because none of the three components is static; both the student and teacher will come to every lesson in a different state of mind and preparedness, and the content changes as the year moves forward. This means that there must be constant attention to the tensions between the three points, and constant adjustments. As explained by one

of my mentors, Miriam Raider-Roth (2017), in her book *Professional Development in Relational Learning Communities*:

By building the capacity to detect participants’ connections and disconnections with self, peers, facilitators, and texts, facilitators can keep a finger on the pulse of intellectual, emotional and physical energy that is part and parcel of engagement with learning. In addition, such attunement can help facilitators support repair or reconnections processes when disconnections occur.³

What could these “disconnections” look like? A teacher disconnected from her students will not understand their academic, social, and personal needs when planning a lesson. A teacher disconnected from the subject will not care about increasing learning outcomes because he does not care about the content. And a student disconnected from the subject will not engage in meaningful learning or growth, something explored in great depth in Anderson and Winthrop’s (2025) *The Disengaged Teen*.⁴ In other words, awareness of the different elements of the Instructional Triangle is the key to running a successful classroom. And central to that awareness is increasing teacher capacity (skills, knowledge, and resources).

From my vantage as principal, the levers over which I have the most influence are the teachers and the curriculum. As explained to the faculty at the start of the year, my core principle in my role is to set attainable standards and support people in achieving them. This model - standards and support lead to success - is also one that every classroom can use. During our inservice in August, the faculty participated in an activity to

²Dorph, G.Z. (2011). Professional development of teachers in Jewish education. In H. Miller, L.D. Grant & A. Pomson (Eds.) *International Handbook of Jewish Education* (pp. 959-980). Springer.

³Raider-Roth, Miriam B. *Professional Development in Relational Learning Communities: Teachers in Connection*. Teachers College Press, 2017. p50

⁴Anderson, J., & Winthrop, R. (2025). *The disengaged teen: helping kids learn better, feel better, and live better*. First edition. Crown.

Admin Supporting Teachers	Teachers Supporting Students	Teachers Supporting Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent application of consequences • Increased vigilance about lateness • Visibility • Open, clear communication • Leave space for creativity • Clarify expectations • Protect the teachers (Offensive-line) • Give teachers the chance to resolve things with students and parents before getting involved • Fully follow-up on progressive discipline • Differentiated management for different teachers • Provide relevant student information in advance • Quick response time and action • Show appreciation • Build a database of resources • Individualized PD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to students who are ill/away with specifics about extra-help, testing, etc. • Designated extra-help • Regular feedback • Look for the positive • Show students that we care • Clear expectations for each other • Anticipate challenges • Work to individual students' strengths and needs (accomodation and differentiation) • Build connections • Follow IEPs • Ongoing communication • Positive reinforcement • Focus on learning for everyone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following school policies, e.g. cell-phone bans. • Collaboration on curriculum, resources • Collaborate on difficult cases • Stand up for each other • Emotional support • Constructive feedback • Safe space for sharing and validation • Stay positive • Respect boundaries • Stay professional • Solution-oriented grade-meetings • Teamwork • Peer mentorship

help articulate the specifics of what this approach could look like. These were the results:

The themes present in this activity line up very well with the Relational Triangle. Teachers want to set achievable and meaningful standards in their classroom, and want support to

reach them. They want their curriculum to be challenging to the students, while also being accessible and relevant.

Taken together, my educational vision could be summed up like this: "Fostering growth in relationships between teachers, students, and curricula to promote and reach improved

standards.” The items in the chart above - generated by the faculty - are the different components of that capacity-building and support.

Having a vision of what makes for comprehensive and effective education - relational awareness and the capacity to make needed adjustments - is all well and good, but how will we achieve it? All of the capacity-building programs described below will be used throughout this school year, with the goal of increasing teachers’ ability to reach all of their students and engage in meaningful work with meaningful curricula.

Coaching All faculty in their first three years with the school, irrespective of years of experience, being on shlichut, and subject matter, are assigned a coach. In their bi-weekly meetings, these coaches work with these new teachers on pedagogy, school calendar and policy, lesson-planning, classroom management, and everything in between. This level of attention seeks to ensure that the newest teachers also get the most support.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) All teachers in the school engage in ongoing learning together, meeting either monthly or weekly (depending on the topic). These PLCs are tailored to address specific areas of need that were identified by Prizmah in their accreditation two years ago, as well as by students and staff in anecdotal conversation. The specific PLCs this year, all run by faculty for faculty, are:

- Cross-curricular integration and interdisciplinary teaching - As educators, we typically work within our classrooms as masters of only our subject areas, leading to

students having a siloed approach to their studies and creating imaginary expectations for what kind of learning exists in each subject (“Why are we writing essays in an art class?”). In reality, there is so much overlap between various subject areas, either in knowledge, practice, and most importantly, skill development. This PLC aims to explore ways we can encourage interdepartmental collaboration to connect different subject areas and learning methodologies to let students know that learning is a holistic enterprise, and that everything they learn in every class can play a part in their lives outside of the classroom. Our PLC discussions will aim to further the second aspect of the BAS Mission Statement: “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.”

- Purposeful Pedagogy: Making Tanakh our Students’ Story - Tanakh is our spiritual guide point, our national heritage, and the backbone of our Jewish identity. Teachers of Tanakh face a unique challenge: connecting students to their religious and spiritual heritage in meaningful, relevant, and lasting ways. Led by Herzog College, this course introduces the CORE, an innovative pedagogical approach to the teaching of Tanakh that places personal connection at the forefront of the learning experience, alongside content acquisition and skill development. We will explore practical ways to implement this pedagogy using a variety of teaching tools with the goal of inviting and encouraging our students to experience Tanakh

as Our Story.

- Focused Impact PLC - This PLC will meet to address the most pressing challenges in our school. By prioritizing urgent, high-need issues, we will collaborate on practical solutions that drive transformative change and directly improve student learning. Our work will be data-centered and data-driven: we will collect and analyze evidence to guide our decisions, measure effectiveness, and confirm impact. Engaging in this work meaningfully will require a greater investment than is typical in a BAS PLC. This includes meeting weekly and completing some preparation between sessions. While the commitment is greater, members can expect to see clear, tangible, and lasting improvements in student success as a direct result of our efforts.
- Universal Design for Learning - The PLC will focus on understanding UDL, different practical strategies and ways to incorporate UDL into instructional design. It will be collaborative and try to bridge the gap between student IEPs and instructional accommodations, but emphasize the benefits for all students.
- Pedagogy of Mathematics - Along with your colleagues in the department, explore and implement recent innovations in the teaching and assessment of mathematics!
- Write to Publish: A Research PLC - Join colleagues in a collaborative PLC dedicated to turning ideas into publishable research. Together we'll brainstorm, write, and refine an academic paper with the goal of submitting to a peer-reviewed journal.

This range of Professional Learning Communities forces staff to rethink their

approaches to teaching by actively engaging the learning process on a regular basis, learning not only from texts but from each other. This puts the Relational Triangle into action by having the teachers step into the role of "student".

Goal Setting and Professional Development Every teacher meets with me in the first weeks of the school to set an individual goal for him/herself. This goal might be about pedagogy, curriculum, classroom management, or any other element related to the Relational Triangle. The teacher then engages in 14+ hours of ongoing learning toward the goal, with regular check-ins with me as the year goes forward. As with the PLCs, this process forces the teacher to reflect on the roles of the subject and the student in the Relational Triangle, and come to new understandings.

Student Feedback All untenured faculty give their students anonymous surveys to gather data about the teaching and learning in their classrooms. Tenured faculty have the option to administer the surveys. These surveys provide valuable anecdotal data about the students' place in the Relational Triangle, and give teachers critical chances to adjust their teaching and the course-content to meet the students' needs.

Observation and Conversation I observe all teachers in their classrooms at least twice each year. For untenured faculty the observation also includes pre- and post-observation meetings to explore the lesson and its delivery. For tenured faculty the feedback is given exclusively in writing, with the option for in-person follow-up conversations. These observations are the "assessment" of our

capacity-building project, whereby we actively explore what is working and what is not, and seek ways to improve together.

Reflective Faculty Meetings In our monthly meetings, between 20 and 50 minutes are carved out exclusively for faculty to reflect on their classrooms and their practice, as a group. Sometimes this is the entire faculty in conversation, and other times it is smaller groups acting as “consultants” for one another according to a protocol.⁵ In either case, the goal is to give teachers space to voice their concerns, be heard, and plan a path forward to resolve “disconnections”.

Bnei Akiva Schools is currently in the process of creating a Strategic Plan, based on the recommendations from our accreditation by Prizmah. The creation of a cohesive curriculum with specific targets in skills and knowledge will be a central piece of that document. It is my conviction that this Strategic Plan will be implemented over four years: first to develop a holistic curriculum that integrates Jewish and General studies in new and powerful ways, then to identify targeted skills and knowledge for every grade in every class, and last to implement the specific techniques and methodologies the teachers need in order for students to succeed at those skills and goals. However, the relational awareness between students, teachers, and the “texts” will be the key to unlocking the potential of that curriculum.

It is my belief that focusing on increasing teachers’ awareness of the relational tensions with students and content will promote better learning in the classrooms and beyond. Bnei Akiva Schools already does an outstanding job

building relational awareness between students in co-curricular programs like Shabbatonim, tisches, and the Rebbe/RGC programs, but my goal is to reach beyond those informal activities. Teachers who can reach more students in a variety of ways on a range of topics will improve learning outcomes across the board, and will forge connections that encourage moral and social growth as well. This is obviously not a simple fix or a band-aid, but a long term growth-oriented reimagining of what makes Bnei Akiva Schools “so much more than a school”. Our Mission Statement demands of us “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” and “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.”⁶ The Relational Triangle, with a focus on standards and support, is how we will get there.

⁵Dunne, Faith, et al. Consultancy Protocol, Jan. 2021, www.clee.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/consultancy.pdf.

⁶“About.” Bnei Akiva Schools of Toronto, bastoronto.org/about/. Accessed 18 Sept. 2025.

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