

Designing 21st Century Jewish Learning Environments for Early Childhood Classrooms (Birth-2nd grade)

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Mesorah

We believe that we can balance traditional Judaism and progressive education!

Our philosophy is that children construct meaning based on their developmental stage in a facilitated environment.

We believe in child centered, experiential learning, and in pursuing it despite resistance- CHANGE IS POSSIBLE!

Action Research

Motivation and Context for the study:



A shared concern about the lack of constructivist, child-centered, developmentally appropriate practices within a traditional Jewish context.

A shared understanding that a focus on the environment was a powerful, measurable lever for creating change in educational practice.

Hypotheses

- Children who know the plot can then make meaning by exploring the environment
- Environment can be used in a planful way to stimulate intra-children conversation that makes meaning about Jewish ideas (in this case chagim), even without direct teacher involvement as facilitator of the conversation.
- Environment (excluding teacher) can provide a chance to see what children know, and to uncover the process of making meaning, relative to the learning process in the classroom



How Do You Define...

Meaning:

Connection with self (in a developmentally appropriate manner and not necessarily accurate by adult standards)

Ability to connect with other concepts

Ability to raise relevant questions

Ability to draw conclusions

Ability to share findings and explain to others

Meaningful:

Integrating knowledge with self-identity

Jewish meaning



Environment:

- Teacher as guide/facilitator is part of the environment but not as instructor. Key to unlocking materials.
- Includes authentic Jewish artifacts, tactile, sensory, interactive materials, books (not including plot), presented in the context of a child-accessible developmentally appropriate environment.

Knowledge:

Factually accurate knowledge at a developmentally appropriate level



We conducted action research in five different Jewish day schools around the country- all in progressive education environments situated in a constructivist philosophy.

The approach we took to early childhood education used both the Reggio Emilia and Montessori methods, which framed possibilities for interventions in the classrooms we studied, and provided a conceptual frame and foundation for understanding the impact of these interventions.



Methodology

- Baseline measure (interviews with students before any provocations were placed in environment/before learning began)
- Minimal teacher intervention- non-prescriptive but still some teaching of mitzvot/mesorah
- Provocations for three holidays: Chanukah, Purim, Pesach- Use of immersive environment
- Teacher as Guide



Studying Children's Meaning-Making

- Unstructured interviews
- Observation of environment/ children's interactions within environment
- Record keeping
- Documentation



Hebrew Calendar vs. Child-Led Learning

- Data that exposes children's thinking relative to the environment
- Documentation of play:
 - choice of play topic
 - specific actions
 - words
 - creations
- Photos, videos, audio recordings, and transcriptions of data used



Data Collection

- Unstructured interviews
- Observation of environment/ children's interactions within environment
- Record keeping
- Documentation



Environment as Third Teacher



Reggio Emilia Approach

- If the environment functions successfully, it is as though there is another teacher in the room.
- The space is used to provoke thought, encourage interactions (helping to develop communication and relationships- child-child; child-adult; adult-adult).
- Purpose: to promote provocative, inquiry-driven, and open-ended learning, leading to construction of knowledge.
- The choice of materials is deliberate as we choose what we want the children to know.
- Needs to be aesthetically pleasing, inviting, also looking at flexible physical and open-ended learning spaces
- Using natural and or authentic materials help to promote critical and creative thinking skills as the children explore and question, helping them to develop an understanding and a construction of knowledge based on their immediate environments.

Environment as Third Teacher



Montessori Approach

- The prepared environment is created to meet the developmental needs of the children.
- Materials are carefully selected to display based on skills of the children in the group
- There is an emphasis on maintaining a clean, organized, and aesthetically pleasing space.
- When a material is mastered it is replaced with a new, more complex activity.
- Teacher serves as a guide in the environment- 'the key that unlocks the materials'

Creating Child-Led Immersive Learning Experiences

It is KEY for teachers to have authentic foundational learning/familiarity of Jewish texts in order to understand HOW to prepare the environment, and which materials to provide to students

It is KEY for teachers to choose specific texts/areas of learning to focus provocations on- and not try to cover every element of every holiday/parasha/concept

In order to be child-led, teachers MUST follow children's interests in some capacity



Immerse! Provoke!

Tactile materials

Sensory materials- child size, child friendly

Authentic artifacts

Allowing for exploration

Books(not plot based)

All presented in child-accessible
developmentally appropriate environment

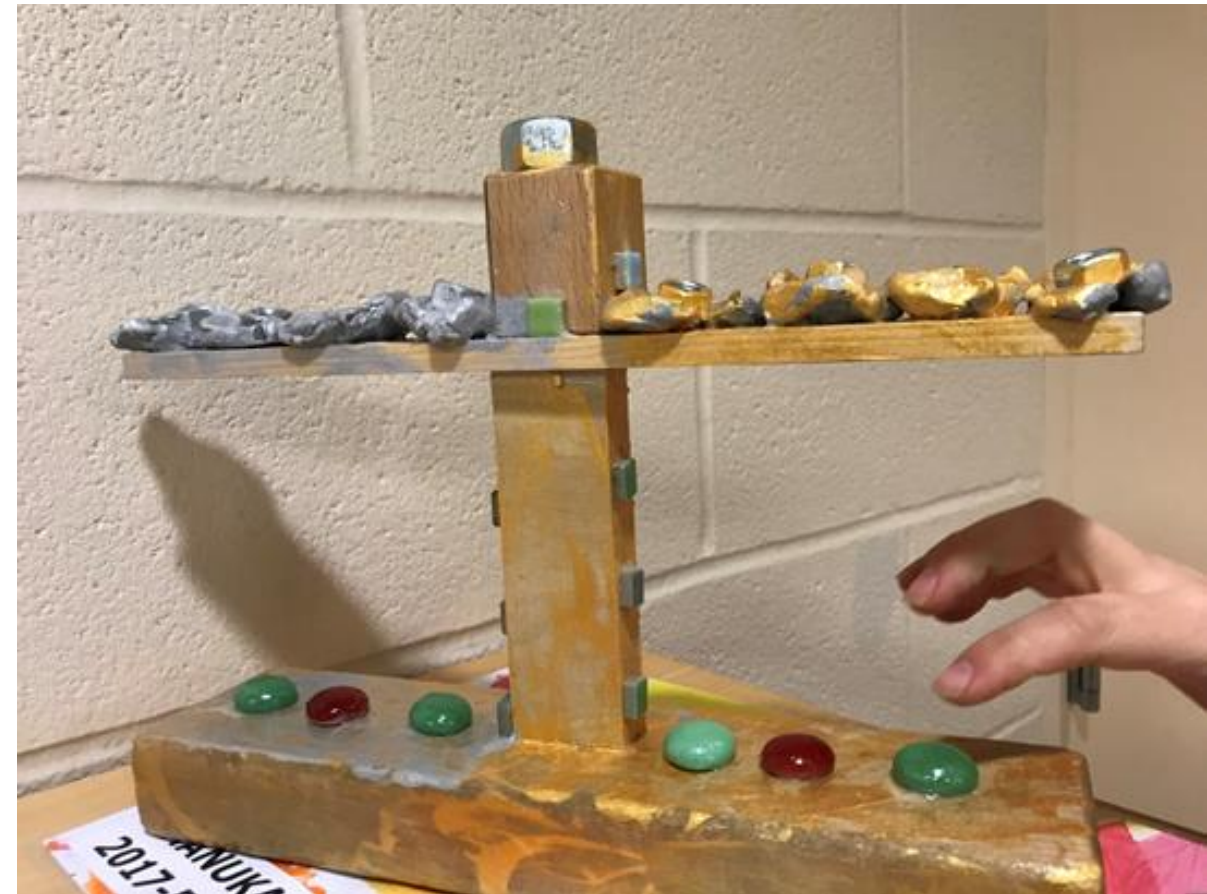
Planned

Time to Explore



Create!

Once children have familiarity can they replicate themselves



Observation and Documentation

- Importance of record keeping- have to write down observations (anecdotal, running records, unstructured interviews etc.)
- Using photos, videos, direct observation and recording
- Purpose:
 - To make students' learning and thinking visible, enabling educators and others to examine the processes
 - A tool for communication
 - An assessment for learning



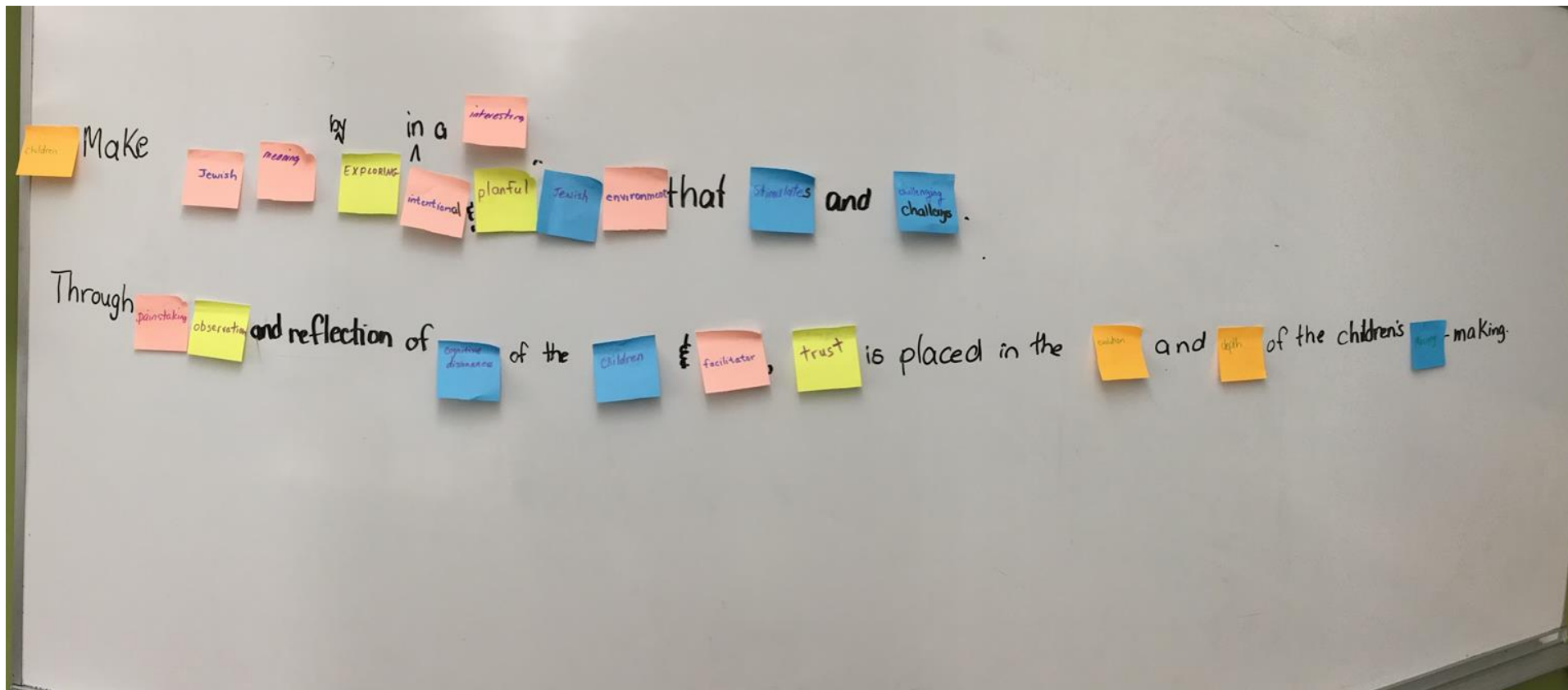
Conclusions and Implications

- Children construct Jewish meaning by exploring in an intentional, playful Jewish environment that stimulates and challenges.
- Through observation and reflection of cognitive dissonance of the children and facilitator, trust is placed in the evolution and depth of the children's meaning making.
- Environment (excluding teacher) can provide a chance to see what children know, and to uncover the process of making meaning, relative to the learning process in the classroom.



The Research/Writing Process

- Discovering this process with a group
- Bouncing ideas/ Collaboration



William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education

**Legacy Heritage Instructional
Leadership Institute**



Early Childhood Rabbinics Initiative

**Developing Text-Aligned
Learning Experiences for Young Children**

LEGACY HERITAGE FUND



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CHAI

A Hanukkah Classroom...



Searching the Text



Understanding By Design + Standards & Benchmarks for Young Children

Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

What do children need to know, be able to do, and to feel?

(Standards, Benchmarks, **Text Study**, Unwrapping, Big Ideas, Essential Questions)

Stage 2: Plan (Text-Aligned) Learning Experiences and Instruction

How will we engage children in learning and exploring knowledge and skills?

(Provocations and Explorations that may lead to Project Work)

Stage 3: Determine Evidence of Growth

Where will I observe children demonstrating engagement, skill development, and knowledge acquisition?

(Documentation and Observation)

A Rabbinics Driven Hanukkah Classroom...

- What **elements of the text** did the teacher incorporate into the classroom experiences?
- What **rabbinic practices** did students encounter?
- What **concepts** or unique features of **rabbinic thinking** did students encounter?



Standards-Based Learning Activities...

- Keep focus on targeted *standards and benchmarks*
- Are rooted in *rabbinic texts*, content, and concepts
- Share *authentic* content knowledge and skills in real-world settings
- *Reveal* the interest & understanding of the child
- Invite children to produce concrete expressions of their *thinking*

Understanding and nurturing these connections begins in early childhood and is cultivated through joyful encounters that inspire wonder and curiosity....Early childhood environmental education focuses less on the knowledge and application of skills and more on developing a young child's values and attitudes about the world around them.

Shelbourne Farms, Early Childhood Education for Sustainability,
https://shelburnefarms.org/sites/default/files/2_introessaysexplanations.pdf

Effective Provocations

- provide an open-ended **invitation** for a child to explore and express themselves
- **provoke** thoughts, discussions, questions, interests, creativity and ideas
- created as an **option** for individuals/small groups of children to choose to examine



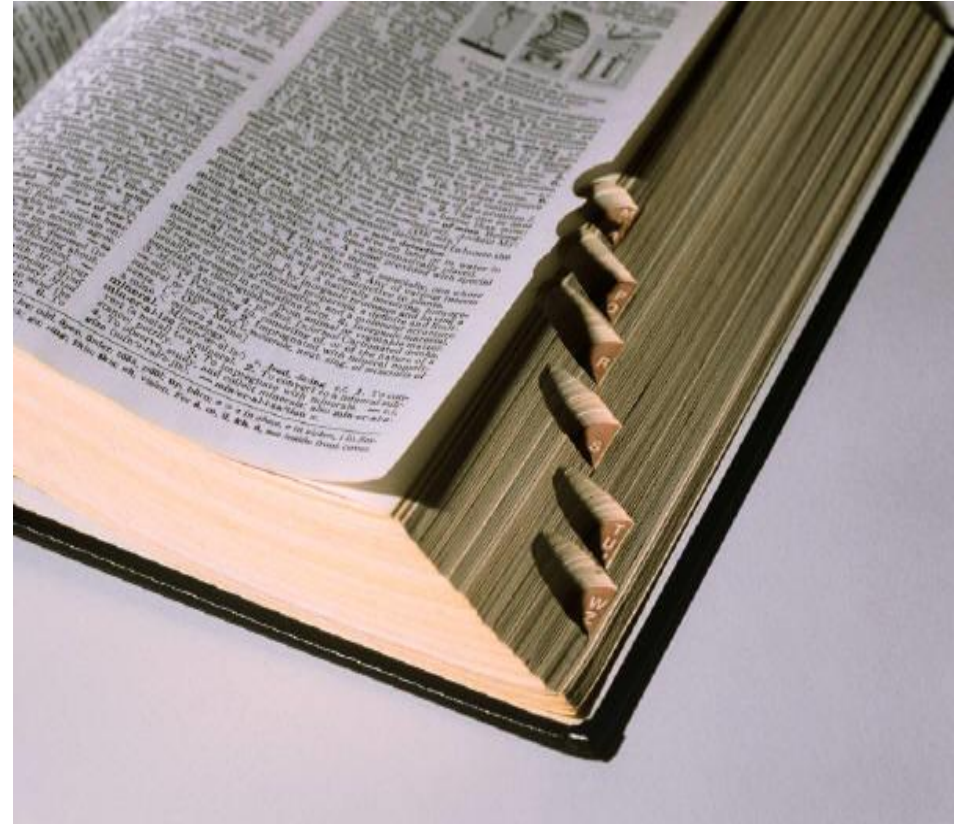
Provocation Ideas:

- photo, picture, book
- nature
- **old materials displayed in a new way**
- authentic objects
- **art materials**



Defining Explorations:

- **Expand** on a thought, project, idea or interest
- **Deepen** the understanding of the child
- **Invite** children to produce concrete expressions of their thinking



Now Your Turn: Build Provocations and Explorations for Passover Learning

- Study the Pesach **Text**
- Brainstorm potential **provocations** for children
- Develop **explorations** that deepen students examination of ideas that attract the children's interest



Text Study Reflections

Classroom Topic	Words or Phrases (note the text)	Learning Activities

Self-Check for Provocations and Explorations

- Would you be **attracted** to these experiences?
- Do they make you want to **play**?
- Is there a **clear connection** to the benchmarks, unwrapping, texts, big ideas, and essential questions? Is anything **missing**?
- What tools will you employ to help guide or possibly change the direction of the explorations based on **student responses** to each experience?



Email Us!

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