

## Research Questions Surfaced through CASJE Convenings and Conversations

Since its launch in 2013, CASJE has devoted sustained effort to clarifying how applied research can stimulate improvement in the teaching and learning of Hebrew in North America. Laying the intellectual foundations for this effort, CASJE commissioned **a briefing paper, Purposes and Practices of Israel/Hebrew Education: Towards a Joint Agenda for Applied Research**. We then brought together thought leaders to respond to the central ideas in the paper, in a live video discussion, a **Google Hangout**.

In Fall 2014, CASJE convened a group of front-line practitioners, researchers interested in Hebrew teaching and learning, and foundations that support this sector, for two discussions about issues facing the field: a day-long in-person **“Problem Formulation Convening,”** and a week-long online **“Blogcast.”** CASJE’s primary goals in all four of these endeavors were to gain a better understanding of core problems that will benefit from a robust and systematic program of applied research, and to begin formulating a series of questions that might guide such a program over time.

What follows is a distillation of the central issues and questions to emerge from these conversations conducted by almost 50 people. We believe that these questions - about **why and what Hebrew, when and where Hebrew should be taught, how, and who should teach Hebrew** - establish the contours for a program of research with potential to improve the teaching and learning of Hebrew in significant ways:

### WHY HEBREW? WHAT HEBREW?

A consistent theme in every CASJE conversation about Hebrew has been that teaching and learning have been impeded by a lack of clarity about the purposes of Hebrew language education. “Hebrew for what?” is not an academic question. It is a practical question that drives learners’ desires to become proficient in the language, and it focuses educators’ priorities in determining when, what and how to teach. At the moment, it is not clear why many Jews do and do not learn Hebrew, and how they might find the reasons for learning Hebrew more compelling.

- Research would address the following questions:
- Despite major efforts and investment in Hebrew language education in North America, what really drives this endeavor? We still have only a vague sense.
- What is in the hearts and minds of North American Jews when they think of why they do or do not want to learn Hebrew? What is their motivation? What is their

"baggage"? How, for example, do people's views about being Jewish and their views on Israel fit into their thinking and feeling about Hebrew language learning?

- With the careful attention made possible by a sustained program of research, a CASJE research initiative can bring clarity to questions such as these, and thereby bring greater purposefulness and coherence to philanthropic investment and educational programs for Hebrew language education.

### **WHEN HEBREW ? What are the forces and factors that play a role in Hebrew language acquisition and learning?**

It is widely assumed that context matters when learning languages. Our conversations reveal how little is known about the contexts that support or impede Hebrew language education, and specifically the social, cultural and developmental characteristics of those contexts. Promising questions for research include:

- How do different, widely held conceptions of the value of Hebrew play out in the way that it is taught? What role does the emotion and belief (of learner, of family, and of community) play?
- What are the developmental trajectories of Hebrew learning that individuals experience as they accumulate exposure to the language over time? How do trajectories of Hebrew learning work in relation to how a person develops as a Jew? Can we somehow capture these lifelong trajectories across different contexts and better understand how these multiple points of exposure and interest work with each other?
- Most people assume that supplementary school children can only learn basic siddur Hebrew and that Jewish Day School children can attain Hebrew fluency. What might research reveal about the kinds of Hebrew gains possible in a variety of contexts, and what are the conditions that enable and constrain that learning?
- What can we learn about learners of Hebrew in different contexts over time?

### **HOW SHOULD HEBREW BE TAUGHT?**

Researchers and practitioners agree that there is great scope and opportunity for experimentally conceived research about the practices and pedagogies of Hebrew language education. This research can be undertaken at relatively low cost and can quickly generate practically resonant findings. It would involve the experimental design, implementation and study of new or long established (but untested) practices. Promising questions include:

- What pedagogical approaches support Hebrew language acquisition/learning? For whom? Under what conditions?

- What are some of the ways to encourage successful Hebrew learning among students with various learning difficulties?
- How does the teaching and learning of Hebrew relate to what we know about the teaching and learning of other second languages?

### WHO SHOULD TEACH HEBREW?

Who should teach Hebrew is not self-evident, especially when there is a perennial shortage of the most qualified personnel, and where Hebrew's different purposes call for language educators with different profiles and different skill-sets. Research questions include:

- What are the characteristics of good Hebrew educators? In what settings? With what students?
- How do good Hebrew educators facilitate Hebrew language learning well?
- Can non-fluent Hebrew speakers teach Hebrew language? If so, how?
- What kinds of professional development for teachers facilitate positive outcomes for students?

### Next Steps

The questions described here lend themselves to **studies of different scales**. Some questions will need to be explored through multi-year research initiatives, equivalent to *the three-year study of Jewish educational leadership that CASJE currently supports* and that is currently being conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). A project of this kind would call for **sustained inquiry over three or four years**, an effort that has not previously been attempted in the field of Hebrew language education. Some questions could be explored through **shorter cycles of quasi-experimental research** in a sequence of linked studies. Small-scale studies such as these have been previously conducted in this field but never as part of a systematic effort to improve practice through a cycle of experimentation and testing.

Either form of study could be launched following a competitive bidding process or through directly commissioning a research team identified as most likely to complete its assignment effectively.

A unique dimension of CASJE's value proposition is that any research it supports must include well-planned mechanisms for practitioner learning and implementation. CASJE is not conceived as supporting research for its own sake. It nurtures research that can and does make a difference to practice, and that, where possible, provides opportunities for practitioner involvement in the formulation of the research questions to be studied.