Research That Matters in the Classroom: How research-practice partnerships sponsored by CASJE help Jewish educators answer their biggest questions about teaching and learning.

What Do Preschool Children in Jewish Early Childhood Settings Think About Israel?

The questions at the heart of our research grew out of an ongoing conversation between the educators and the researchers, and so we set out to answer these questions as a collaborative effort. We’ve been able to answer some of our original questions and, like all good questions, they’ve also led to additional (still unanswered) questions.

- Dr. Sivan Zakai, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

This project grew out of a genuine collaboration between researchers and practitioners, in the very best spirit of partnership. After working together for a year in a professional development cohort, some teachers in our group had questions about their own practice as early childhood Israel educators. As researchers, we were able to help them build an inquiry to explore those questions in a way that felt both meaningful and manageable. Meaningful because the questions are rich and will speak to other early childhood educators and Israel educators, and manageable because sharing the workload of a full-scale study meant that the teachers could partner with us while staying focused on their full-time classroom lives. We were constantly surprised and challenged by the differences in how we thought about the questions and analyzed the data, and our work is stronger because it really represents thoughtful discussion from multiple angles.

- Dr. Lauren Applebaum, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

The previous year, educators had shared dilemmas of practice, and one educator asked, “How do I know that our teaching is connecting the children to Israel? How do I know what I am teaching is being learned?” This really stuck with me. We would need a new way of working to answer such a simple yet important question and the research process became the natural way for us to answer it together.

- Anna Hartman, Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago

Firstly, as educators, being part of the official research process from beginning to end has deepened our knowledge for both my two colleagues and me. This research will inform early childhood educators’ practice and the way Israel will be taught and experienced in early childhood programs. Secondly, this research is unprecedented with children under the age of 5 and is going to reveal much about young children’s concept of Israel. Using real data from the voices of children shows great regard for the rights of children and their ability to grasp big concepts. It was fascinating to see how much they know and the connections that they made to Israel from both their families and their school environment.

- Cherene Radis, Director, Moriah Early Childhood Center

Teaching the children about Israel is one of my favorite topics in the classroom. The history of Israel fits so well into the school calendar, peaking with independence and memorial observances in the spring. Throughout the year, we build up to these big days. I learned so much through this research about what children take away from the learning. Once the information is theirs, the story and the details are different, but in wonderful, personal ways. I am looking forward to teaching about Israel this year, incorporating what we have learned, and adjusting the curriculum and teaching style accordingly.

- Hagit Lewis, Early Childhood Jewish Studies Teacher and Coordinator of Jewish Experiences for Families, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School

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What Can Teacher Research Offer Jewish Education?

**CASJE practitioner research can be a powerful form of professional development.** All the teachers in my project at Gann could reflect at length on the ways they grew as teacher leaders through their participation in the research. But practitioner research also has the power to help build the field of research in Jewish education. While there are only a handful of Jewish education researchers, there are thousands of practitioners. **Creating partnerships between researchers and practitioners opens a pathway to expanding our knowledge about Jewish education.** Practitioners bring unique insights into the contexts they study. For example, the teachers with whom I worked used their knowledge of students both to shape their research design and analyze their data. This process produced a highly localized knowledge that nonetheless spoke to issues of broad concern in the field including the relationship between Jewish education and environmental justice and the role of race education in Jewish day schools.

- Jonah Hassenfeld, Program Officer at the Mandel Institute for Nonprofit Leadership (formerly Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning at Gann Academy in Massachusetts)

I’ve found the project tremendously useful as I teach the core skill of close reading to my students. It has given me useful framing language and has helped me hone my definition of the skill. Most of all, it has helped me understand how critical it is to make the process of close reading—with all its false starts, dead ends, mini epiphanies, and self-corrections—visible and audible for my students as they build their skills.

**It was beneficial to have Jonah as a leader and thought partner on this experiment... it’s also opened doors to informal collaboration with peers in other departments, as well as my own.**

- Kevin Cattrell, English Faculty at Gann Academy

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**Partnerships between researchers and practitioners help overcome traditional gaps between research and practice.** When practitioners and researchers collaborate in defining questions and collecting and interpreting data, they increase the relevance of the research and build curiosity about the outcomes. Educators get insights into questions that matter to them and experience the power of studying those questions in systematic ways. Researchers learn how practitioners think about each aspect of the research, including the implications for practice.

We see these benefits in two studies funded by CASJE as part of its small grants program. Researcher Jonah Hassenfeld enabled teachers at Gann Academy to investigate compelling questions they faced in their teaching and to share their findings with a broader audience of Jewish educators. Researchers Lauren Applebaum and Sivan Zakai collaborated with a group of Chicago-based early childhood educators to study how young children think and feel about Israel. Both researchers and practitioners were highly invested in what they and other early childhood educators could learn from this research.

Fostering such partnerships is a central commitment of CASJE, which sponsors applied research on pressing problems in Jewish education jointly identified by funders, researchers and practitioners. Situating research in these partnerships helps narrow the gap between studying Jewish education and improving it through systematic study.

- Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, CASJE Advisory Board Member, Mandel Professor of Jewish Education at Brandeis University

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