

# Integration: Closing the Loop on Holistic Jewish Growth

■ by **JEFFREY KRESS**

Kress argues that day schools should structure time in their busy schedules for students to reflect upon the diverse strands of their learning and integrate them into their emerging sense of Jewish identity.

As a field, we have made significant progress in breaking down some unhelpful barriers. To a large degree, we no longer define *Jewish learning* as purely cognitive and knowledge-based, nor do we equate *Jewish identity* with warm fuzzy feelings devoid of depth. We can do more, however, to strengthen the bridge on an ongoing basis. As we have learned from recent work in neuroscience as well as decades of work in social and emotional learning, the cognitive and socioaffective elements of learning and development are inseparable. While we have embraced the idea that “experiential” education can take place in schools, or that schools provide activities other than book learning, we still have progress to make in embracing the role of all educators as equal partners in promoting holistic growth, and in helping youth to synthesize the array of developmental inputs that they face.

While we do not know all there is about promoting holistic growth, we are far from starting at square one. The scholarly literature reveals basic principles of promoting the broad identity outcomes that encompass what we know, believe, do and feel with regard to Judaism. We should incorporate some of these principles into day school pedagogy; here are three:

- *The power of relationships* in the learning process, and the potential for the learning process to help us develop interpersonal skills.
- *The centrality of emotions* in focusing our attention and facilitating learning, and learners’ capacity to develop emotional awareness and self-control.

- *The importance of meaningful goals and personal connections* in motivating learning, and the power of educators in connecting learning to matters of personal growth.

In my work with Jewish high schools, I have been struck by how many programs and activities are planned to address social and emotional elements of education. A glance at a school calendar reveals an array of assemblies, trips, shabbatonim, tefillah activities, arts, sports and discussion based seminars or advisories. There is an array of input around social action, Jewish values, moral education, ethics, developmental issues, conflict resolution, and so on. Students have opportunities to share their ideas, opinions, points of view, doubts, concerns. A student will encounter a myriad of messages and experiences—in and out of school—related to who they are and whom they should, or could, become.

For these messages and experiences to be most impactful, learners (particularly adolescents) must integrate them into an ongoing sense of self over time. To create a coherent life narrative, students need opportunities to digest these messages and experiences, to break them down in their minds and to think about how they relate to who they are, to contemplate discrepant messages, and to compare new ideas or actions against previously held beliefs about the world, about Judaism, and about themselves.

The rich environments of day schools hold great developmental potential, but also come with a challenge. As students think about their school experiences, will they picture a rich tapestry or just a bunch of colorful, but disconnected, threads?

The potential for fragmentation of the “message,” the educational opportunities relevant to Jewish identity development, along with the idiosyncratic nature of the process (students bring different experiences with them into the school, and have differing experiences while there) leave the “recipient” (the student) with the task of connecting experiences into a cohesive whole. Weaving together experiences is a complicated task to begin with. Students receive many devel-

opmental inputs and some, such as many of the increasingly ubiquitous messages from social and digital media, are inconsistent with those of the school.

Educators’ developmental efforts are complicated by the realities of contemporary schooling. The emotionally moving assembly about genocide in Africa, for example, is scheduled immediately after a drama-filled lunch period and right before a big math mid-term. Or, the innovative moral education program ran for the first three months of freshman year, but no one has ever mentioned it again.

From this perspective, the challenge of *integration* is one of scaffolding connec-



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tion-making on the part of the students, so that they are best able to integrate the disparate elements of their experience in and out of school into their perceptions of their developing selves. Mediated self-reflection can be an important element in achieving such a synthesis. Self-reflection may be facilitated by opportunities for introspection, for the consideration of the personal meaning of events once time has passed. This internal process can be shared with, or related to, others in writing (such as a journal), in conversation, or in artistic expressions. These “others” may play a role in clarifying ideas by “actively listening,” or they may simply share reflections in turn.

Students would benefit from sustained opportunities to process, with peers and with adults, the wealth of educational messages received in class, at home, at shabbatonim, at camp, on the Internet, and so on; to consider, in multiple ways and on an ongoing basis, one’s identity and the impact of experiences—including discussions in classrooms about content areas—on this identity. The question “What does it mean to you as a developing person and Jew?” has the potential to become the in-

tegrating connector for the diverse experiences, both in and out of classrooms, in which a student participates.

Whereas curriculum-based or theme-based approaches to integration focus on the message to be delivered in consistent ways by the messengers (the educators), integration through self-reflection focuses on the *recipient*, namely, the student, and the mediation of his or her ability to make connections among educational experiences and with the evolving self. The “theme” here *is* the recipient or the recipient’s holding up his or her self-schema in the light of new experiences. The goal would be an integrated outcome that would be idiosyncratic, not monolithic.

An area for further development is how schools can offer more opportunities for ongoing, guided, personal reflection aimed at drawing connections among what is learned in subject-matter classes, what one experiences in out-of-classroom events, and how one sees one’s self as a Jew. Schools have experimented with advisories, deans responsible for particular grades, and other forums for this. The

challenges, though, remain formidable.

While some might scoff at the futility of “getting students to talk” about important issues, I along with many educators have found that given attention to the three ideas above (strong relationships, emotional depth and sensitivity, and authentic respect for the students’ goals and ideas), students, and adolescents in particular, will embrace such opportunities.

A first step might be to start chipping away at the mindset that maintains the classroom vs. out-of-classroom developmental distinctions and to add a Jewish developmental lens to all school activities. A mapping exercise can help bring this to life. Where during the school day are intentional efforts being made to work with the three elements listed above? Where are the lost opportunities? How can we best connect our efforts one to another and how can we help our learners reflect on their own developmental journeys? And, how can students come to see a school as a comprehensive developmental whole which is larger than the sum of its parts? ■

## Understanding and Working with Vulnerable Students

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which were written “weekly goals” and “long-term goals.” Students are given 20 minutes to write what they want to accomplish that week (to earn a B in a math class, to pass a science test), activities to complete in order to reach the goals, an assessment of time needed, and the specific days on which they would commit to completing the listed activities. Then they share aloud what they had written.

In this way, students help each other think through how to achieve their goals. By seeing each other’s goals, the likelihood is increased that this process will raise the bar for many of them. Over time, they will learn that achieving their goals is something that they can do—that it is not overwhelming. By subdividing their goals into manageable chunks, they will learn that achieving them does not need to be too daunting.

The most effective strategy for helping students to reduce their vulnerability and to increase their self-regulation is getting to know them well and becoming an important person in their lives. In our studies of students in Jewish schools, youth movements and camps, we ask students to indicate about how many adults in their lives (at home, at school, in the community) care about what happens to them. Students who indicated “zero adults” had significantly lower scores on overall learning and development than students who indicated a number greater than zero. Fifty-four percent indicated that between 11 and 30 adults care about what happens to them. An additional 18 percent indicated a number greater than 30 adults. Students who indicated either 13-25 adults or more than 25 adults had the highest levels of learning and development, significantly differing from the other students, and the fewest challenges

with interpersonal relationships.

In schools that effectively work with students who are vulnerable, the typical students also benefit. Typical students quickly learn that how they interact with vulnerable students matters to teachers. I observed a teacher respond to a negative interaction that occurred between a typical student and a vulnerable student while they were working in a small group. Instead of focusing only on the two students, she stopped the work of all the groups. She told them, “I can see that you are engaged in your group projects, but the whole fabric of the community that we are creating in this classroom has been torn asunder. We cannot continue until this has been addressed.” This teacher embodies a core principle of Jewish tradition: the health of society depends upon the way that we treat the most vulnerable in our midst. ■