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Book Review

Jack Schneider, *From the Ivory Tower to the Schoolhouse: How Scholarship Becomes Common Knowledge in Education* (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014)

REVIEWED BY MIRIAM HELLER STERN

Why don't teachers listen to the sage advice of educational researchers? And why don't researchers produce knowledge that is useful to teachers and policymakers? When does educational research actually affect the practices of teachers and the lives of learners? In *From the Ivory Tower to the Schoolhouse: How Scholarship Becomes Common Knowledge in Education*, historian of education Jack Schneider undertakes to explain why certain scholarly ideas in education have crossed the great divide from theory to practice more successfully than others. In an age when "evidence" and "data" have become buzzwords in education policy, Jack Schneider offers an insightful and practical analysis of the historic bridges and chasms between educational research and practice in American universities and public schools. By examining the success of exemplars over the last century, Schneider explains the unique circumstances which seem to have enabled a few prominent university-generated theories to be transported from ivory tower to schoolhouse. In the niche field of Jewish educational research, where discussions about the relevance and influence of research have been alive of late, Schneider's analysis provides essential perspective.

Schneider analyzes four scholarly ideas which have successfully penetrated American teaching practices of the last century: Bloom's Taxonomy, Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, The Project Method, and Direct Instruction. He demonstrates that each one of these exemplars has four common attributes. First, each has "perceived significance" among teachers,

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meaning it addresses a big picture issue which teachers agree is relevant. Second, there is “philosophical compatibility” between the assumptions of the scholarship and the core beliefs that underlie a teacher’s professional identity. Third, the idea conforms to “occupational realism,” designed to be easy to implement given the real constraints of time and duties shaping American teachers’ lives. Finally, the idea is “transportable,” easily communicated “down the hallway and across the generations,” and accessed among practitioners for long-term use. Schneider’s examples will be of particular interest to Jewish educators and educational researchers, as these exemplars have been and continue to be influential in Jewish educational practice.

Bloom’s Taxonomy is a common feature of most curricula in schools of education. How did “the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives for the Cognitive Domain,” which was not initially designed for ease of classroom use, become one of the most common frameworks for educational planning and evaluation? Originally intended for a narrow audience of evaluators in higher education, Bloom and his team introduced the Taxonomy as the product of years of research into the educational outcomes of higher education. Schools began to adopt the taxonomy in the 1960s because it was both scientific and easy to digest. Schneider points out that Bloom’s Taxonomy made headway in actual classrooms “because teachers were repeatedly exposed to it, because they believed it made sense with regard to how it addressed issues of student ability, and because they saw it as relatively straightforward to implement” (p. 42). Although the original idea was complex and the subject of extensive scholarly discourse, it was easily summarized in a chart as a clear hierarchy, enabling its use by teachers. Most importantly, this taxonomy of objectives was not objectionable; it pointed to standardized outcomes for those who sought them, while it provided a roadmap beyond basic knowledge of facts for progressives who sought to foster broader intellectual and emotional growth in schools. In the politically polarized realm of schools, Bloom’s Taxonomy was well-suited to educators with a wide range of agendas, traditional and progressive. Even while it attracted critique, ultimately Bloom’s Taxonomy created consensus.

Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) is an idea that has gained as much traction in Jewish education as in general education, perhaps because it drew rapid attention in elite independent schools and ultimately found a home in public schools as well. Reputed to be “contemporary education’s most popular idea” (p. 74) and particularly well-communicated by its author, MI provided “scientific legitimacy” for a more individualized understanding of all learners, justifying teachers’ desire for autonomy in lesson planning (p. 57). It validated the care many teachers have for their students and provided a framework for addressing different ways of learning. As a theory, MI was not threatening to teachers; it did not require upending the grammar of schooling or teachers’ regular practices, and it complemented what many teachers already believed about learners’ diversity. For all of these

reasons, MI was able to move from the hallways of Harvard to the hallways of schools.

The popularity of MI had a collateral effect that is instructive for those engaged scholars who wish to influence the field of practice. Practitioner hunger for strategies to implement the theory of MI fed a market of entrepreneurial, third party purveyors of professional development who commercialized the theory by offering recipes for practice to which Gardner himself does not ascribe. Gardner has noted that MI has been misinterpreted, particularly as it has been fused with discussions about learning styles; the theory has taken on a life of its own. Schneider offers a moral of the story, suggesting that although some versions of the implementation have not stayed true to the theory, the wide recognition of the theory has shined a spotlight on diverse ways of thinking, thereby generating important reflective discussions among educators about new strategies in curriculum and instruction. While the path to the schoolhouse is not without potholes, this example signals the possibility that with the right collaboration and policies in place, a future idea could be implemented with greater rigor and control.

The third exemplar featured in this book is also trending in Jewish settings. Project-Based Learning is a focus in schools that value authentic, interdisciplinary student-centered engagement with subject matter, but few practitioners know of the original “method” developed and popularized by Columbia University Professor William Kilpatrick nearly a century ago. Kilpatrick’s 1918 essay entitled, “The Project Method,” gained widespread support as the popular and charismatic professor wove together the educational research ideologies of the day (even when they conflicted, as in the case of John Dewey and Edward Thorndike) to create a method that would have broad appeal. A self-identified strategic self-promoter, Kilpatrick was extraordinarily successful at marketing his ideas to teachers. The project method was not just an idea, it was a methodology which was easy to adapt to a variety of circumstances and settings as a teacher saw fit. While consistency of quality and depth may have been sacrificed, the idea of the project method gained traction precisely because teachers could add it to their curricula where they pleased. After a decade, Kilpatrick modified his view such that the project could supplement, rather than supplant the curriculum. “Eventually, this version of the project method would become so commonplace that it could hardly be recognized as a specific method” (p. 98). The project method developed occupational realism as Kilpatrick let go control of it and allowed teachers to make it their own (even if they were sometimes distorting the original intent). As with the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, popularity had a price.

Of the four educational ideas featured as success stories in the book, Direct Instruction stands out as the one in the group that does not reflect a progressive educational ideology. The inclusion of this methodology in the book is an important reminder that despite the progressive leanings of many

graduate schools of education, it is still the case that teacher-centered, didactic instruction has its place in the field of practice. Direct Instruction invited many critics who favor student-centered pedagogy and teacher autonomy. Nonetheless, the method has maintained staying power due to its ability to achieve the results districts are looking for—higher test scores—especially in low-income and under-resourced schools. While teachers may wince at the loss of autonomy and creativity in a scripted curriculum, for many teachers in the trenches, a detailed prescription is what they need to succeed. So despite its critics, “as a method of last resort, it endures” (p. 139).

In his conclusion, Schneider makes numerous recommendations for how readers might work to fortify the few bridges that connect scholars and practitioners by advancing the common characteristics of the exemplars he studied. Some of these suggestions could easily be undertaken to the same effect in the realm of Jewish education. To improve the *perceived significance* of scholarship among practitioners, Schneider suggests that key practitioners could take on the role of blogging or sharing significant research on social media. Scholarly journals (such as the *Journal of Jewish Education*) might consider adding a dedicated section for practitioner research and/or commentaries on practical applications of scholarly research. To improve *philosophical compatibility* between the worldviews of research and practice, graduate programs in education can incorporate research strategies into the training, so that early career practitioners can experience the value of research for advancing their own practice. To that end, coursework can be designed to include research on action as well as shared inquiry (like the Japanese lesson study model). To improve *occupational realism*, making research more in touch with the realities of the profession, scholars could convene professional learning communities of practitioners, serve as scholars-in-residence for central agencies and institutions, and develop classroom-ready materials that apply their research. In Jewish education, this “reality check” would enable researchers to engage more deeply with educators, central agencies and funders to collaborate on advancing a shared mission.

The final characteristic, *transportability*, is perhaps the toughest pill for scholars to swallow, as the cases in this book demonstrate that scholarly ideas may be diluted and misappropriated once they reach a certain level of popularity, as they are transported widely by a variety of interpreters. Nevertheless, without transportability, great scholarly ideas stay in the realm of scholarship and have limited value in the field. Scholars should seek to disseminate digestible versions of their work in accessible language. Perhaps in the relatively small field of Jewish educational research, scholars could retain more ownership and control over their ideas if they did more of the work of translation and training themselves. One of the challenges in Jewish education is that ideas need to be transported across the bounded professional networks of specific educational settings (day schools, supplementary

schools and camps, not to mention denominational boundaries.) To enhance the sharing of ideas across educational settings, the field of Jewish education needs better channels for the broad dissemination of thought leadership and research-based tools for educators.

The book's concluding call to action is for an end to finger-pointing between educational stakeholders who do not understand each other's realities and thus continually make unrealistic demands of one another. We must stop wondering why researchers have not solved all of the problems of education and why teachers can't just implement what the research shows. Schneider calls for consensus in the public school arena, and while unifying disparate opinions may seem culturally elusive in a Jewish context, I would suggest that collaboration is certainly possible and beneficial in the field of Jewish education. Formal reciprocal relationships between Jewish educational researchers and institutions could be developed, to ensure that we move from a model of scholars offering "one-off" packaged professional development workshops to models of tailored, sustained, collaborative inquiry that place practitioners and scholars in conversation. Too often, professional development is conducted with a sage on the stage model, giving scholars no opportunity to learn from the teachers in the audience, to imagine together how the research might be implemented in practice or to discuss how the theory should perhaps be adjusted.

Many of the obstacles to collaboration cited in this book are tied to the bureaucracy of public education and manifest to a much lesser extent in Jewish education. Private Jewish day schools, and all the more so, part-time Jewish education programs, do not have to adhere to the same standards, procedures, and accountability measures that constrain public school teaching. This is a tremendous opportunity for developing and testing new methods in Jewish educational settings, if more scholars and practitioners had the resources to engage in such worthy projects together.