

Family, community, values are embodied in pre-school initiative

By Leon Cohen of The Chronicle staff

One day during this school year at the Mequon Jewish Preschool, the subject was the Hebrew letter aleph. Observing the lesson was Naama Zoran, a consultant from the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative.

Wearing crowns for Tu B'Shevat, Mequon Jewish Preschool kindergartners with teacher Hudi Rapaport slip notes in the replica Kotel (Western Wall) that they built as part of the school's work with JECEI. Photo from MJP.

When the lesson was over, Zoran said it was "beautiful," according to MJP director Rivkie Spalter. But in a conversation afterward, Zoran "pushed the teacher further" with questions like "Why learn the letter aleph? What makes it important?"

And when, among other reasons, the teacher said the letter is important because it is found in the siddur (prayer book), Zoran replied, "If that's how you feel, why not tell the children?"

So the next class, the teacher brought in a siddur and showed the children places where they could see the letter aleph. Soon, said Spalter, the school was receiving calls from some of the parents saying that their kids were asking to see siddurim so they could show where the letter aleph was.

This illustrates an important part of the approach to early childhood education that JECEI seeks to foster nationally, and that it is now implementing with three Milwaukee-area Jewish preschools: Jewish Beginnings Lubavitch Preschool and Gan Ami Beginnings Preschool and Kindergarten of the Harry & Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center, as well as MJP.

JECEI's approach seeks ways to make learning "meaningful to the child," said Spalter. It "sees children as capable of so much," demands "heightened sensitivity to every interaction an educator has with a child" and tells teachers that they "also have to learn from the child, that to listen to the child is a learning experience," she said.

Beyond the children

But the approach goes beyond the children. Pnina Goldfarb, Ph.D., director of Gan Ami, said JECEI seeks to transform "the culture of the school" so that it will "continually build the learning capacity of the staff," making them "constant seekers and learners."

"For the very first time, we have teachers on a regular basis reading material about early childhood and understanding what it is to be an ongoing learning professional," Goldfarb said.

They now have the ability and the confidence to learn and share their knowledge with each other, "creating a community of learners," Goldfarb said. "A year ago, the staff couldn't do that."

Finally, the JECEI approach goes beyond any individual school to involve schools collaborating together, and beyond the schools to the children's parents.

“JECEI works across the denominational and institutional spectrum,” said Rabbi David Gedzelman, executive vice president of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, which in cooperation with other foundations launched JECEI. “Nobody else is working in that way.”

And Pat Bidol-Padva, Ph.D., acting executive director of JECEI, said JECEI is “beginning to gather survey data” showing that “parents whose children are enrolled in Jewish preschool education are more engaged and connected” to the Jewish community, and often stay involved after their children leave preschool.

This was one reason that the Milwaukee-based Helen Bader Foundation, which doesn’t usually give funds to national projects and initiatives, became a founding partner in JECEI, according to Tobey Libber, program officer in the foundation’s Jewish Life and Learning area.

“If you were to describe the focus of the Jewish Life and Learning area of the Helen Bader Foundation, it would be to further efforts to strengthen the Jewish community as a whole,” he said. “I truly believe that having top notch Jewish preschools will lead us to that end.”

Now, the Bader Foundation and the three schools are funding a cooperative effort to train these schools’ staffs in the JECEI approach. This process began this past autumn and will last four years. (The Bader Foundation has funded the program for three years, in keeping with its usual practice, but Libber suggested it will give a grant for the fourth year.)

And it is particularly significant that the schools are working together on this project, said Libber.

“The biggest transformation is that [the schools’ leaders and staff members] now realize they are partners in the effort to get young Jewish families to send their children to Jewish preschools,” he said. “This is a model for other Jewish agencies that provide similar services in the Jewish community.”

Pioneer in Italy

JECEI’s approach is inspired largely by the Reggio Emilia philosophy of education. According to Diana Ganger, JECEI program director, this was developed in a region of Italy after World War II by Loris Malaguzzi, an anti-fascist partisan fighter.

Ganger said in a telephone interview that Malaguzzi wondered “how could it happen” that Italians would follow fascism. “What kind of education would produce people that do not think on their own?”

So Malaguzzi and a group of parents decided to create schools — today 33 of them in Italy, according to Ganger — that are “value based,” said Ganger. These values include cooperation, fostering children’s individuality and independent thinking, parental involvement, constant dialogue and research.

Ganger has a background in social work and is a native of Argentina who has lived in Israel. When she read about Reggio Emilia in the early 1990s, she said she was struck by how this approach is “so consonant with big Jewish ideas.”

But while JECEI’s approach is inspired by Reggio Emilia, “it is not a copycat,” said Ganger.

In fact, according to Rabbi Gedzelman of the Steinhardt Foundation, JECEI combines Reggio Emilia “with a Jewish values-based curriculum which emphasizes essential Jewish values and their terminology.”

JECEI, said Gedzelman, also adds something called Emotionally Responsive Practice, developed at Bank Street College in New York City.

According to the Web site for the college’s Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice, this seeks to integrate “preventive mental health practices into early childhood and early grade school programs so that young children experience school as a supportive, meaningful, learning environment.” This component “helps teachers to be sensitive to the emotional lives of children,” said Gedzelman.

Gedzelman said JECEI is in the “second phase” of development. The first began with research and development in the fall of 2004, and in 2005 moved to working with individual schools in various parts of the country.

The second phase involves working with communities of schools, and is being implemented in Denver as well as Milwaukee, Gedzelman said. To date, JECEI is working or has worked with about 20 schools across the country and is “reaching out to other communities and local funders,” said Gedzelman.

Moreover, last spring, JECEI did a survey of parents at five JECEI schools and at six non-JECEI schools in West Palm Beach, Fla. Gedzelman said the data “showed clearly that parents of the children in the JECEI schools were much more engaged Jewishly” than the parents in the other schools.

Two JECEI consultants — Naama Zoran and Lori Geismar-Ryan, both of whom report to Ganger — are working with the Milwaukee schools. In addition to providing consultants, JECEI holds retreats for professionals and lay leaders of schools, some locally, others nationally.

Both Spalter of Mequon Jewish Preschool and Goldfarb of Gan Ami are “very enthusiastic” about this work. (Devorah Shmotkin, director of Jewish Beginnings, did not return calls for an interview.)

“I know a lot about preschool education, but I don’t know a lot about how to make systems change,” said Goldfarb. “This is a systems change approach.”

And to Spalter, “We can’t say we are excellent and therefore we can relax. We must go to the next level.” JECEI “takes us to the next level.”

For more information, see the Web site www.jecei.org.