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A MODEL FOR USING DIVERSITY TO BRIDGE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

by Hana Bor

“Die!” That’s what it sounded like I shouted to my English-speaking students when they overwhelmed me one day with questions in our American Jewish classroom.

!ד (Dai) is what I knew I was saying. It means “Enough! in Hebrew, the language I grew up speaking as an Israeli.

My students were shocked. I was confused by their reaction.

I asked why they look insulted. Then I explained what I meant and they took turns asking questions.

Eventually we understood each other and worked together.

That’s an example of a model we are building into our program of Master of Arts of Jewish Education (MA in Jewish Education) at Towson University in Maryland: recognizing diversity’s dangers and using diversity as a bridge rather than a barrier in education. We are working to bring new teachers into Jewish education, encourage professional development for veteran educators, and help develop a vital environment for day school, supplementary, and informal Jewish education. Our students reflect their own diversity, coming from a variety of religious, educational and personal backgrounds.

Jewish education provides an excellent platform for confronting the diversity situations that appear in many schools, professional or societal settings. Cultural differences can create barriers between people. It doesn’t matter whether the issues are language and behavior, religious or political beliefs, income or styles of music or clothing. It doesn’t matter whether the differences come from across borders or from across the street. It doesn’t matter whether the differences appear in face-to-face or online classes, in formal media or social networking. The dangers include that participants – students and teachers – project a sense of superiority, resent feeling treated as second class, or reject each other’s lessons or value.

For example, what seems like a natural match for American Jewish school administrators – hiring Israelis to teach Jewish liturgy and ritual, family life, history, Israeli affairs, and Hebrew – can itself serve as a model of diversity’s challenges. It reveals how cultural contradictions can damage how teachers relate with each other, within communities, and with students and families. The same situation can appear in any setting when people encounter different educational, religious or philosophical backgrounds: even seemingly close cultural cousins can

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express misunderstandings by setting up value judgments related to their cultures: my customs are “better” than yours.

The MA in Jewish Education model embraces using those differences to:

- Teach with cultural diversity in mind.
- Help students accept and respect differences.
- Use differences to help colleagues work together effectively.

Researchers have shown that educators often manage differences, starting with a recognition of culture as learned characteristics.¹ Cultural loyalty can result in problems, such as prejudices² and ethnocentrism.³ One of diversity's challenges is recognizing how many characteristics people identify with. The GLOBE study of 62 societies, for example, identified nine cultural dimensions.⁴

I conducted research on diversity in Baltimore, MD., Jewish day and supplementary, community, Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox schools. I interviewed each school's administrators, and individual teachers born or raised in Israel or who considered themselves Israeli. I studied personal upbringing, culture and training, teaching experiences, and knowledge of and relationships with students, school staff and community to ask:

- a. Why and how do Israelis teach in American Jewish schools?
- b. How do American Jewish school administrators relate to Israeli teachers?
- c. What tools can help these groups cooperate more effectively?

My findings highlighted the value of understanding culture in building cooperation and avoiding misunderstanding or conflict. All persons, including educators, can work together more effectively if they are sensitive to diversity in terms of cultural as well as geographic characteristics, especially in our increasingly globalized society.

I identified four areas educators can use in working together. Administrators and teachers can ask themselves about their own cultural habits in terms of professional discipline, language, identity, and social graces. They can address each area by listing how they express themselves, interact with students, colleagues or administrators, and work with others. Those personal explorations can provide the basis for professional enrichment.

Administrators can set up events for the constituencies to meet, with an attitude of emphasizing learning and of applying a common language of professionalism, not of “converting” colleagues into one way of thinking. Administrators and faculty can collaborate as mentors and mentees; interact during faculty meetings, community events, and informal settings; learn local school culture, including language, policies, procedures and hierarchy; work within teams; and engage other constituencies in classrooms and extracurricular activities to discuss cultural attitudes. The model calls for cultural exploration at every stage of education, in

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self-understanding and in hiring as well as in the classroom.

We can build our diversity bridge by going beyond asking "What do we have to teach each other?" To maximize effectiveness, we can also ask "What do we need to learn about each other?"

Teachers face hard work in this model. They must identify their own and other's cultures. They must work simultaneously with the differences among colleagues, administrators, students, families and community. Their rewards are that as they identify and understand each other, they become more accomplished at teaching and learning together. They develop an ability to respect each other's skills and knowledge as they recognize each other's perspectives. They also provide a model for cooperation for their students and to society as a whole:

- Learning does not mean adopting or converting
- Different does not mean better or worse.

Endnotes:

1. Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomy, S. *Culture and Interpersonal Communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988.
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3. Porter, R.E., & Samovar, L.A. "An introduction to intercultural communication." In L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication: A reader* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 1997.
4. House, R. J., & Javidan, M. "Overview of GLOBE." In R. J. House, P.J. Hanges, M. Javidan, P.W. Dorfman, V. Gupta, & Associates (Eds.), *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004.

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