



12 - Keystones: Inspiring Students to Change the World with Eric Petersiel (April 2024)

Eric Petersiel
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Sharon Freundel:

I'm Sharon Freundel, Managing Director of the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC). Welcome to JEIC's Keystones Podcast Series. The keystone is the central stone at the summit of an arch, locking the whole together. We believe that a strong Jewish Day School education is what holds the Jewish people together as we look towards the next generation.

In today's episode, we will hear from Eric Petersiel from the Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto on developing a meaningful social justice curriculum, based in Jewish text to build an understanding of how students can change the world.

Eric Petersiel:

About six years ago, we started a remarkable project known as the Tikkun Project. In my past, in over 30 years of Jewish education, perhaps the most common element of social justice education or *tzedakah* was the myriad requests that we received every year for students to give money for a good cause. We decided it was time to try to turn that into an intentional educational understanding of how students can actually change the world positively, rather than simply have a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah project where they give money to a worthy recipient.

So the program was devised about six years ago, and it's been building out over that time, and what it does is try to identify a space within the curriculum in the local secular curriculum at every grade level, by which a meaningful social justice unit can be developed, centered and anchored in Jewish text, that then grows one upon the other to create a scaffolded understanding of what it is, how it is that students can change the world.

And so now we're working with two other schools across Canada who are interested in joining us, now that the curriculum is built out from kindergarten through eighth grade. And just to give you an example, our first grade social studies unit in Ontario is a unit on accessibility. And so we wrote a unit about what it means to be welcoming, and our students did an accessibility audit around the building and the neighborhood and took the local public transportation down to the



local library and reported on all the accessibility questions and concerns that they had. And then asked us as a school, they did an audit of our school and said, “Tell us why there isn't, while the school is officially accessible, why isn't there a ramp into the chapel?,” the area where most of our guests join us. “We'd like to partner with a local agency, which provides ramps called stop gap and provide a small wooden ramp to ensure that our space is as open and welcoming as possible.” So really gave the grade ones an amount of agency for their own understanding of how it is that they can change the world. Their parents tell us that for a year afterwards, all they would do was point out places around the city where other areas were inaccessible and other things that could be barriers to creating a warm and welcoming environment.

When I was the principal of the school—I've been at the school for 24 years—I would say we received in most years between 50 and 100 requests from worthy organizations whose most creative idea was: “Can we talk to your kids about our worthy organization that they can simply donate money?” And the question, of course, that could be impactful, but the real question for us is how does it change the students' own understanding of their responsibility to the world?

And so we've teamed up with a PhD researcher to create a measurement that moves from kindergarten through grade eight, the students are measured on their own attitudinal change towards the responsibility toward the world. How did this unit affect my understanding of the factors in the world around me? And how does it change my own attitude toward what I can do to make the world a better place? It's social justice education with specific attitudinal markers and measurements to demonstrate change.

This is the first year where every grade in the school has a *tikkun* unit built right into their secular studies education. And so, theoretically, we've now reached the point where the program is complete and can now be shared and supported, not only in other Jewish day schools, but we believe as well in other faith-based institutions to anchor social justice in the appropriate holy texts of their faith as well.

At this point, we wanted to build out the units to have a full program first. So this is the year we'll take a baseline measure of every student. And now we've worked carefully to devise that metric and that measuring tool, and so we'll be able to have that data moving forward. But it's a little bit early at the moment. Now, it's still anecdotal, and as I was taught many years ago, the plural of anecdote is not data.

I think the most important element of the project directly addresses the struggle for every Jewish day school in North America seeking academic excellence and Jewish studies excellence combined. And it takes our understanding of responsibility of good secular education and no longer silos it from good Jewish education, because we understand what meaningful and



transformative education is, in affecting students' ability to make change or understand the world differently or their responsibility to global change, but to anchor it in Jewish text. So we have a unit in the sixth grade in Ontario, again, there's a required geography unit related to immigration. And our students now anchor that unit in an understanding of how immigrants, Jewish immigrants, have come to this country over time and all immigrants have come to Canada. They interview a wide range of immigrants, and the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society of Canada joins us and supports our students in trying to explore the current state of immigration into Toronto and how the students understand, again, their responsibility and their reflection on the state of immigration today. And at the end, they opted as a group that they would then create welcome baskets – what is it that immigrants need, depending on where they come from and what they're experiencing. And again, prepare a *tzedakah* project that was both meaningful, educationally valuable, and not simply a one-off opportunity to do one nice thing and then walk away.

We're actually working in partnership with three Jewish day schools – one in Toronto, one in Winnipeg, and one in Vancouver. And as with each other school, our ultimate goal would be that we use this project as the basis of bringing social justice educators together from across the Jewish world and across the secular world. Our school is uniquely positioned as both an accredited independent school with the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools and an accredited International Baccalaureate school, so we have access to relationships with the other Jewish day schools, with the other International Baccalaureate schools around the world, and with the other Canadian accredited independent schools. So we have different audiences to work with educators who want to have the same goals in very different environments. Our goal is to try to shape the program in such a way that it will be exciting and positive and engaging for all of those institutions to shape their social justice education who all have similar goals for what they hope their children and their students will understand and become, and give them the framework to make that meaningful, powerful, and sequential, intentionally sequential. That's the real goal.

We tried to create a program which is flexible enough that allows students and educators and other jurisdictions to see where the connections are for them, which units and which ideas fit into the work that they are required to do from a secular education point of view, but can make more meaningful from a Jewish point of view. That's what the program was meant to do.

Every unit has a hands-on opportunity as well. And, again, our goal is that the educator responsible for delivering the unit works with the support in our school, of a director, a fellow who actually tries to identify that opportunity. So our kindergarten students do a unit related to food scarcity. And then in the end, they go to the local supermarket. They purchase food; they try to understand where food comes from, and then they come together to make soup and



donate it to the local food bank, and so it serves at a local shelter. So every unit is identified in such a way that, in order to be meaningful, there should be an action that students engage in to demonstrate their responsibility to others and to the world.

So the Curriculum Director, Dan Abramson, is a really brilliant educator. And what Dan is trying to do, he builds out, he has a network of social justice educators in a Facebook group, certainly there are Jewish and non Jewish educators from around Canada engaging. And he hosts a series of lectures by educators at times that are virtual. And then as I say, the long term goal would be to gather social justice educators around North America and bring them together for a conference or an opportunity to learn from each other because the long term goal, I believe strongly that every really, every Jewish day school in North America, in many ways, has a very similar goal and responsibility related to the attitude that students have regarding their responsibility to the world around them, to the Jewish world, to the global responsibility. And yet, it's often done in a disorganized manner. Whichever organization knocks loudest at the door or is simply engaged with members of the community gets the attention instead of bringing social justice from an intentional point of view, in a scaffolded intentional manner. That's the real difference in the program.

I remember, as I said, I've been in Jewish education for 30 years now, and I remember well over 20 years ago that the Rashi School in Boston had a social justice educator on staff. And that was such a unique understanding and program that we learn from other institutions who take their responsibility of social justice so seriously, but what I think is so new and exciting about it is the connectivity to the appropriate educational goals of the secular program that, again, so teachers no longer see it as an add on – I have to do this unit on top of the work I already have to do that makes it harder for me. And what we're trying to say is, “No you don't; you already were going to teach, for example, in Ontario, the fifth grade unit on government, you didn't have a choice. That's the unit you have to teach.” We're going to reach those objectives by turning it into a unit in which students understand their responsibility and their role in influencing government. How will students take responsibility for their democratic position and their ability to influence governmental figures? It's the same unit, that by placing it within the context of Jewish textual background, we really give them the understanding of how this can affect them and change their lives and the lives of others.

What's important to me is that this is never intended to be a proprietary program, and although we've piloted it and developed it, it will only have value if other educators engage with it. It will be a free, shared, growing resource and a website where social justice educators contribute ideas and thoughts and modify the curriculum for their own usage. It's really an exercise in collective innovation. And so we want as many people as possible to be aware of, to be engaged in, and to benefit from the work that we've done.



Sharon Freundel:

To find out more about this topic and other ways to catalyze radical improvement in Jewish Day Schools, please visit our website at JewishChallenge.org.