Hearts and Minds:
An Experiment in the Utilization of Day School Research

June 2017

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Introduction

The AVI CHAI Foundation-funded report *Hearts and Minds: Israel in North American Jewish Day Schools* was released in April 2014. Providing findings from a study of 95 Jewish day schools, the report offered an unprecedented set of insights into how Israel education was being enacted in schools, by whom, and to what effect, for thousands of students. Although the report did not provide a set of specific practical prescriptions, it did conclude with a series of broad recommendations about ways to deepen and intensify the effectiveness of Israel education in day schools.

In the months following the report's publication, school leaders approached members of the research team at Rosov Consulting with interest in exploring how the study's findings could inform improvements in their practice. The AVI CHAI Foundation was responsive to this interest and turned to the iCenter and Rosov Consulting to propose an approach for capitalizing on this interest.

The concept developed by this team called for recruiting schools ready to use the *Hearts and Minds* report as a stimulus or catalyst for focused change in the delivery and/or content of Israel education. This interest would be the shared starting point for all participating schools. What, however, schools would do with this interest was not known up-front; each participating school would identify an aspect of Israel education that, inspired by the report, they wanted to improve. The project's approach was to be unscripted. Schools would determine their own change-goal as well as the processes they would employ to address that goal. At the same time, schools would be advised to focus on one specific aspect of their Israel education activities they wanted to change. Unlike the iCenter's iNfuse initiative, where the intent was to bring about whole-school change in the field of Israel education, in this new project schools would employ a more pinpoint change-strategy. To paraphrase the language of education scholar Michael Huberman, schools would engage in educational *tinkering* not *transformation* — an approach Huberman strongly endorsed.

The project was experimental in concept and in application. This was the first time that a change initiative in day schools was prompted by a study conducted in the schools. It was not known to what extent schools could tease out useful applications from the study or to what extent the study would be useful to schools in addressing their needs relative to other resources they might utilize. Additionally, given the unscripted quality of the process, it was not known to what extent schools would choose to focus on areas of practice on which they might collaborate with other project participants. These uncertain features of the project were placed at the center of an evaluation effort on which we report over the following pages.

DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation employed a qualitative approach. The Rosov Consulting team observed the project process as it unfolded, specifically at points when different project participants came together: at the project's launch; on occasions when small groups of schools met with a mentor; and at the project's end when schools shared their work with the whole group of participants. Typically, in the weeks after these observations, we conducted follow-up interviews with representatives of the participating schools, project mentors, and the iCenter's Project Director.

Interviews with mentors (5/6) and schools (8/9)[1] took place in Fall 2015 following an in-person launch meeting, in Spring 2016 toward the end of the academic year, and again in Spring 2017 after the conclusion of the project. We observed the project launch meeting in person in Fall 2015, two virtual meetings in Spring 2016, and, finally, two online gatherings of schools and mentors at the project's end in January 2017. Throughout the project, we received written updates from the iCenter's Project Director who we interviewed at regular intervals throughout the project.

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[1] Due to staff turnover and/or scheduling challenges, fewer interviews were conducted in Spring 2017 than Fall 2015 and Spring 2016.

Overview of the Project

RECRUITMENT

The heads of all 95 schools that participated in the *Hearts and Minds* study were invited to participate in the project. They were sent an email message inviting them to submit an "expression of interest" if they wanted to take part. In their expression of interest, they were asked to indicate the following:

1. Why you think your school would benefit from taking part in this initiative;

2. Whether there is a particular aspect of the *Hearts and Minds* research that might be relevant to your school; and

3. Who would lead this work at your school and their special qualifications for doing so.

Interested schools also had an opportunity to learn more about the project at an information session at the 2015 North American Jewish Day School Conference led by a representative from the iCenter and Rosov Consulting.

Fewer than 10 schools responded to the initial communication. After some additional prompting, 10 schools signed up to take part, including five K–8 schools and five K–12 or stand-alone high schools. One of the high schools subsequently dropped out before the formal launch of the project.

LAUNCH

The project launched with an in-person convening in Chicago at the iCenter. This brought together team members from each school along with six experienced iCenter mentors — each of whom was designated to work with groups of two or three schools. So that these groups could be formed around shared areas of interest, and so that participants would indeed come to the meeting well-enough prepared, the iCenter sent to schools a protocol for engaging in a self-guided process for identifying and sharpening their area of focus, following a careful reading of the *Hearts and Minds* report.

The in-person launch was designed to build on this preparation work in the following ways. The launch included time for:

- Further exploration of data generated during the *Hearts and Minds* study that did not make it into the report but that was relevant to schools' areas of focus.

- Exposure to iCenter resources relevant to the schools' areas of focus.

- Sub-group meetings in which matched schools learned more about one another's areas of focus and the reasons for their interests.

- Development of an implementation plan and timeline for the next stages in the process.

The schools chose areas of focus that compellingly reflect the range of contexts in which Israel education can occur in a day school and the age-range of students exposed to Israel-related content — a range and variety highlighted in the *Hearts and Minds* report. This group of nine schools chose to work in the following areas: developing an Israel advocacy course (1 school); rethinking/designing the Israel experience/trip and its curricular lead-up (3 schools); revamping the integration of *shlichim* into the school (1 school); developing experiential/co-curricular Israel activities (1 school); and redesigning or developing new curriculum scope and sequence about Israel history, conflict, and students' relationship with Israel (3 schools).

Specifically, the areas of focus, the relevant student grade levels, and the associated category of activity were as follows:

Grade Level	Area of Focus	Category
Grade 12	Israel advocacy course: finding accurate and real info re: Israel and deepening student ties to Israel — post-Israel experience (trip is being reworked after merger of schools)	Advocacy
Grades 9–12	Effectively engaging *shlichim* — Israel engagement throughout the school	Extra-Curricular – Professional Development/*Shlichim*
Grade 10 and Grades 9–12	Pre/during/post Israel experience learning — special focus on post-Israel learning; dealing with complexities of Israel	Israel Experience
Middle School	Strengthen student understanding of contemporary Israel, increase student confidence re: Israel knowledge	Curriculum [History/development of Israel, current events, developing personal perspectives]
Middle School	Israel education during MS years to prepare students for Israel experience in Grade 8	Israel Experience
Middle School	Units of study using primary and secondary sources to promote critical thinking and engage students with diverse perspectives	Curriculum ["Real Israel", diverse narratives]
Middle School	Affective elements of Israel education in MS: outside the classroom Israel learning (Israel clubs, lunch, Kabbalat Shabbat, physical environment) — as a way to move towards more systematic curriculum for MS	Extra-Curricular
K–12	Teaching politically sensitive topics — demonstrating compatibility between Ahavat Yisrael and complexities of the conflict	Curriculum [Politically sensitive issues, diverse narratives]
K–12	Strengthen co-curricular coherence (Scope and sequence)	Curriculum [Scope and Sequence integration]
K–8	Curricular coherence culminating in Israel experience	Israel Experience

PROJECT PROCESS

The original intention for the project was that once schools had been matched with similarly focused peers, they would form a Community of Practice facilitated by their mentors. Mentors would provide monthly check-ins to keep each school progressing towards its unique project goals. Besides encouraging collaboration between schools, this model promised economies of scale within the available budget, with a single mentor being able to meet with up to three schools at one time. This was the process initiated at the in-person launch.

Over time, and as schools' experiences and project plans diversified, the Community of Practice design continued to be executed in just one instance with two schools that were both working on projects related to their 8th grade Israel trip. Instead, over the course of the 18 months of the project, the mentors had to meet one-on-one with schools more or less frequently depending on the schools' responsiveness and their perceived needs. The schools came together again in January 2017 to share their projects and learnings with one another.

At the start of the project, the iCenter matched schools with experienced iCenter-affiliated mentors who could support them in the varied areas of Israel education in which they were interested and/or who had a special understanding of their particular contexts. Even with this careful matching of mentor with projects, schools did not make consistent use of this support; some schools were decidedly unresponsive to mentors' efforts to move their work along until pressed by deadlines. Interactions occurred sporadically or on an as-needs basis over the period of the project rather than according to a strict schedule, as originally planned. These interactions evolved into a limited coaching model in which the mentor responded to the expressed needs of schools rather than advancing a predetermined agenda or delivering expert input and resources. In doing so, the process called for far more time and investment from the mentors than originally planned or budgeted.

PROJECT PRODUCTS

The iCenter has already shared with the AVI CHAI Foundation a report on the deliverables produced by schools, and, in many instances, the artifacts produced by students as a result of schools' efforts. These artifacts include curricular units, extracts from journals produced by students during the course of school Israel trips, reports on changes schools made to their staffing for Israel education, materials that students worked with, and other physical accessories from their efforts.

Almost all of these products align with recommendations explicitly made in the Hearts and Minds report, as follows:
  - They "make the most of school trips to Israel" by connecting the content of schools' Israel trips to the trajectory of Israel education over preceding years;
  - They tap into "the power of the personal in schools" by bringing new and younger Israeli personnel into the school;
  - They "get real about Israel" in middle schools and high school so as to introduce students to more complex and challenging issues related to contemporary Israel;
  - They "reach beyond the affective" calling students to use their minds and not just their hearts when they relate to Israel.

Findings

OVERVIEW

When speaking with team members in the schools and with mentors, their overall reflection on the project experience was mixed. They were disappointed with the process and yet satisfied, even proud, of the products they created at the end of that process. Paradoxically, they have addressed some of the most problematic features of Israel education in day school, as identified by the *Hearts and Minds* study, and yet the role of the study in their having made such changes is not clear.

This project was designed as a light-touch intervention, especially when compared to other iCenter school change efforts such as iNfuse. After the intensive experience designing their implementation plans during the in-person Chicago convening, schools generally implemented their plans independently, with relatively little consultation with their mentors.

Some schools were generally confused about the project's design and intentions beyond the original meeting. They were unclear about the expectations vis-à-vis the mentor-mentee relationship. In Spring 2016 interviews, several schools did not know or understand that the project was continuing into the 2016–2017 school year. With a relatively open-ended, light-touch design, schools and mentors were not required to adopt a specific set of mentoring practices or submit to particular project implementation deadlines.

Following intense exposure at the start of the project to the *Hearts and Minds* report and to additional data generated by the research study, participants did not refer back to the content of the report or make use of it in any evident way. And yet, as we have indicated, the adjustments they made in their schools have brought about some of the changes specifically recommended by the report. Not only that, in most cases schools did ultimately produce Israel-related projects of which they felt proud. These projects seemed to have broader reach within the school's Israel culture than the project's genesis might have presaged. Moreover, the work in which schools have engaged seems to have stimulated important conversations among faculty and school leadership.

In the following sections, we explore some of these paradoxes more fully, especially as they relate to the project's process. In the final section below, we reflect on the role of the *Hearts and Minds* report and on the overall process employed.

STIMULI FOR CHANGE

Short Term Goals – Clear Focus

The projects that were executed most fully, and most likely with greatest success, were those directed to shorter-term goals. Two schools identified their Israel trip as an area for improvement and had Spring 2016 trips to plan. This gave them, and their mentor, a concrete deadline towards which they worked. It resulted in great satisfaction with the experience of sharing with one another and with the opportunity to deepen their thinking and practice around their Israel trip.

Schools that identified longer-term planning goals (developing a curriculum or Israel experience for the year after the project ended) had a harder time leveraging the mentorship experience to full effect. One mentor noted:

"[There is] frustration in not seeing it implemented and knowing if there is follow through. It would have been great if [the project] was piloted last semester and there was some give and take over material …"

— *Mentor*

Creating Time

It is a commonplace that teachers and school leaders identify a lack of time for planning and reflection as a critical challenge in their practice. It is not surprising, then, that the most appreciated aspect of the project was the time it provided by means of the in-person gathering for intentional brainstorming and planning about Israel education, away from the stresses and interruptions of day-to-day teaching and administration. Perhaps one of the reasons the mentoring model had trouble gaining traction is precisely this sense that schools express of not having enough time to plan or of being distracted by more immediately pressing concerns.

"Don't underestimate the power of giving people 48 hours away from school to THINK. That is a gift. School administration life is often running from one crisis to another, busy, busy, busy. The ability to stop and reflect – that is a tremendous gift. The sessions themselves may be good, but just the time away is gold."

— *Participant*

"Having time away from school in a supportive environment with other people thinking about the same question was really helpful."

— *Participant*

"When we met all of us in Chicago for the conference. The HOS, my supervisor…– we haven't met the 5 of them again since then. Every time we spoke it was a phone call, email but it really gave us a sense of a structure and a sense of understanding of what our job is and what are the expectations."

— *Participant*

Seeding Change from the Bottom-Up

Several schools took on projects that required rethinking elements of their curriculum or of schoolwide culture around Israel. These projects required participants to engage their colleagues (in both General and Jewish studies) in discussions around complex issues related to Israel. In their final reflections about their projects, several schools noted how their work in this project, and their exposure to the *Hearts and Minds* report, stimulated important shifts in their school's larger thinking about Israel education.

For example, one participant noted:

"People don't want to deal with it [complex Israel issues] at all. They feel that thorny discussions would turn people off. The research showing that if you are not exposing them to a more complex narrative they ultimately question everything - that backing, sharing the study with our departments and talked about changing the approach - was very helpful."

— *Participant*

In a way, the project's model for school change is one of "bottom-up" experimentation. By empowering a small group within the school (with administrative backing) to take on projects with relatively wide scope, important conversations about Israel education began to take place beyond the core group of participants.

CHALLENGES TO CHANGE

Lack of a Clear and Consistent Mentoring Model

While the project was staffed by highly experienced, knowledgeable, and well-regarded Israel educators and mentors, there was no specific mentoring model driving the relationship between schools and their mentors in large part because schools were unwilling to commit to the Community of Practice model originally established for the project. Except for making the mentor available as needed, and "keeping feet to the fire" by checking in (more-or-less regularly depending on the school's needs), a dynamic unfolded in which there were no rigid expectations about how the mentoring model would unfold. Mentoring served different purposes for different schools based on their existing capacity. The Project Director noted:

"[There was] not a straight-line trajectory. Schools use mentors very differently – some really needed the mentors, but some really didn't. [In one case] the few calls with [the mentor] gave them what they needed. The mentoring was less important than having a framework to push them"

— Project Director

One mentor noted that a clearer framework would have been helpful:

"[It] would have helped if there had been clear tools to guide the process all the way through. Other projects we worked on have had key tools that were templates for conversations and for deliverables; clearer process of change and holding people accountable to their outcomes and process."

— Mentor

The responsibility for driving the mentorship model rested mostly on the schools. Some schools were satisfied with this. They were happy to tap into this resource if and when they needed it which meant, in some cases, that they did not respond to efforts by mentors to maintain contact and support. Other schools were disappointed. For example, in a school where implementation was quite challenging, the school staff felt they did not receive enough coaching and redirection to help get re-oriented when things were not going to plan. In another case, the school felt they needed more technical support in finding relevant materials for their curriculum development, and were not interested in "coaching" from the mentor so much as resources to use.

"[My Mentor] did follow up with me every few months. After September, I didn't hear from them. I had no check in. No follow up, or an attempt to do a re-approach. I don't know if it was helpful or not. For me it wasn't that helpful. The program didn't go as planned."

— Participant

Staff Changes/Lack of Administrative Buy-In

Predictably, and as is quite common with many change efforts in schools, staff turnover or lack of administrator/leader investment in the project seems to have hampered progress. In one school with major administrative turnover, the teacher involved in the project was left unable to execute his plan. The more sporadic and light-touch mentoring approach, coupled with a lack of administration buy-in, left the project somewhat frozen. In another school, the staff engaged in the original planning for the project either moved on from the school or into different positions leaving the proposed implementation plan without a motor to keep it moving.

"It's challenging for one person who is a teacher in a system without buy-in [to implement change] while the school is also in another change process."

Reflections

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE *HEARTS AND MINDS* REPORT AND THE PROJECT

Schools expressed appreciation for the *Hearts and Minds* report and for the presentation at the launch meeting that provided them with additional exposure to data from the study. In this respect, they saw the study as a resource and stimulus.

As we saw previously, some felt that, armed with data from the report, they could confront challenges posed by skeptical colleagues. One participant expressed this sentiment in the following way:

" It was helpful to have the backing of the research from the Pomson report…Coming back armed with information to say that this is the way that people are doing it now."

— *Participant*

The Project Director noted that the report gave participating schools a shared language. The very concept of "Hearts and Minds" was a powerful prompt to broaden the goals of their Israel education efforts from the affective to something more intellectual and more challenging. And yet, it is ironic that the participants themselves may not have known that they were speaking the same educational language until the end of the project, given their limited interaction with one another.

In the final analysis, it's not surprising that none of the schools' projects explicitly or self-consciously drew from the report. The report was not prescriptive in this way. It provided broad recommendations but not guidelines for how to implement those recommendations. As a research report, it was not designed to teach. It did not provide a blueprint for school change. In this vein, one of the participants made clear with great effectiveness what could and could not be derived from the report:

"I really liked the framework about the individual – and developing the individual's connection to Israel. I'm not sure how to do that in terms of the curriculum when you have so much to do in terms of history in order to get the individual in there. It's been interesting to think about but not sure I accomplished that in the school."

— *Participant*

It is also possible that with more interaction between the participants, the schools would not only have acquired a shared language, they may also have developed shared theories of action that derived from the central findings of the report. Connected in this way, the report would have provided an additional set of threads by which to hold their efforts together.

Without expending additional resources on bringing the participants together at other points in the process, it is unrealistic to expect deep engagement with the report or other common resources. The participants possessed a shared starting point. They then followed their own paths to destinations that were different from one another even while, at the same time, their destinations to did reflect their common point of departure.

This is a phenomenon on which the Project Director touched in our final interview:

"I wonder if we were expecting too much too soon. We felt a lot of pressure to make the connection with the Hearts and Minds [report]. In the end, they (the schools) got there. But they needed time."

— *Project Director*

THE PROJECT ITSELF

Just as we had asked about the connection of their efforts to the *Hearts and Minds* report, we also asked team members and mentors, in final interviews, about what they gained from the project experience. Specifically, we asked, had there been no Hearts and Minds project, would they have managed to produce what they did?

Most of the school people indicated they weren't sure about the project's precise value-proposition. Some expressed appreciation for exposure to the iCenter and its resources; they had not previously been aware of what the Center had to offer. Generally, though, they believed that they could have done the project work on their own. This assertion can't be verified, but it is surely connected to the fact that just 10 of the schools that participated in the *Hearts and Minds* research originally volunteered to participate in the project. By definition, this roster of schools is a self-selecting group generally committed to (and arguably driven by) Israel education. The comments of one participant convey this point well:

"Hearts and Minds was one piece but I would have done many of these things anyway so it was a bit forced. It was nice to have a reminder about my progress, but those were already things [I was doing]."

— *Participant*

The mentors offered a more nuanced response to this question. They argued that while some of the schools might have been able to execute their plans without the project or the supports it provided, their school-based efforts would probably have been neither as deep nor as sophisticated.

MAKING THE BEST USE OF RESOURCES

As has been mentioned previously, this project employed a lighter touch approach than other initiatives led by the iCenter. The goals of the project were more modest as were the resources available. Against this backdrop, the project was structured around a Community of Practice model which over time evolved into a limited coaching model, with a major stimulus provided by the launch meeting.

Schools appreciated both the initial and final opportunities for sharing and learning with whole group. Several interviewees reflected that they would have appreciated an opportunity for such connection more often. When the Community of Practice approach did not play out as intended in the project design, schools lost a sense of being in a cohort; for some that simply had not been a primary motivation for getting involved in the first place. Several mentioned that a site visit from the mentors might have been more productive in pushing their work forward than periodic virtual check-ins. Others sought even more extensive opportunities for connection, despite the fact that getting the schools together in the first place had been logistically challenging:

"The Hearts and Minds meeting in Chicago offered a helpful framework and a sense of community – sometimes we can feel kind of alone…[It would have been] better if there were more structured ways for us to get together in person again for sharing ideas and materials."

— *Participant*

Conclusion

This project presents two paradoxes in action. Inspired by the *Hearts and Minds* study, and informed by the findings of that study, the project resulted in participating schools taking actions consistent with some of the recommendations made at the conclusion of the study. At the same time, those who participated in the project did not make active use of the study after the project's launch. Reflecting on their products, they did not directly attribute what they produced to the study itself.

This paradox helpfully clarifies what indeed might be expected of research projects such as the *Hearts and Minds* study. Such projects provide inspiration and information; they do not provide prescription. They can give schools a different vision of the possible and a language with which to talk about that vision, but they do not provide the means or know-how by which to achieve that vision. That is a task for other individuals and agencies closer to the everyday work of schools.

This project also presents a second paradox. The schools participating in this study tinkered effectively with aspects of how they engage in Israel education in generally effective ways. And yet, the school-based participants claim that they would have achieved such outcomes without the additional supports provided by the project framework in which they participated.

It is possible that because the participants were a self-selecting group, highly motivated to bring about change in Israel education, they might have produced these outcomes come what may. Yet, without the stimulus, opportunity, and ultimately accountability created by this project, it is hard to see how they would have made positive changes with such consistency. As outside observers of what transpired, we are skeptical that the schools would have accomplished as much as they did without the stimulus provided by this project.

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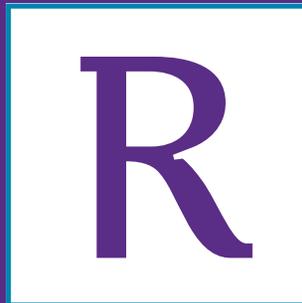
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