Turning up the Volume

A Call for More Youth Voice in Jewish Service-Learning

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Proponents of youth voice, efforts to engage young people in leadership roles in projects, have enshrined this concept as a core element in service-learning programs. Youth voice is often cited as a quality standard for service-learning, yet youth voice often gets scant attention in Jewish service-learning. Our article addresses the issue of the appropriate role(s) of participants in shaping, carrying out, and assessing the impact of JSL projects. Drawing on examples from the field and theoretical literature, the article explores why youth voice has <u>not</u> been more central in JSL and makes a case to expand youth voice in its many strands.

While most [service-learning] practitioners agree that youth voice is an important element [of service-learning programs], many struggle with implementing it.

<div align="right">Justinianno & Scherer (2001)</div>

Proponents of youth voice, efforts to engage young people in all aspects of a service-learning project, have increasingly enshrined this concept as a core element in service-learning programs. The National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), for example, lists youth voice as one of its eight quality standards for service-learning: "[High quality] service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing and evaluating service learning experiences with guidance from adults" (K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, n.d.) There are numerous examples of secular service-learning programs that have actively involved participants in all these components.

In contrast, most young participants in Jewish service-learning (JSL) programs tend to be recruited for prepackaged program models, such as rebuilding hurricane-torn neighborhoods or improving physical conditions in a Brazilian slum over a spring break. Even informal and unscripted encounters with homeless people, such as PANIM's Street Torah, tend to be programmatically defined so that the youth follow a prescribed course of action (Lencher, 2011). This

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packaged nature is captured in the definition of Jewish service-learning (JSL) in the Repair the World study, *Jewish Service Learning: What Is and What Could Be* (Irie & Blair, 2008, p. 1):

Jewish service-learning combines direct service that responds to real community needs with structured learning and time for reflection, all of which are placed in the rich context of Jewish education and values.

With this emphasis on responding to predetermined needs and structured learning within the context of Jewish education, it is not surprising that youth voice gets scant attention in leading reports about JSL such as the 2010 and 2011 studies of JSL conducted by Chertok and colleagues at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

This article raises the question of the appropriate role of participants in shaping, carrying out, and assessing the impact of JSL projects. Drawing on examples from the field and theoretical literature, our article describes the concept of youth voice, explores why the concept has *not* been central in JSL, provides examples of powerful youth voice, and makes a case to expand youth voice in the many strands of JSL programming. Given the lack of systematic analysis of youth voice in the JSL literature, many of the examples cited in this article are drawn from the secular service-learning field.

YOUTH VOICE AND ITS ROLES IN SERVICE-LEARNING

According to Justinianno and Scherer (2001), youth voice refers to the input young people provide in developing and implementing service-learning projects, plans, and policies. Several reviews of the service-learning literature by Billig have concluded that youth voice is an essential element of quality service-learning that helps magnify its positive outcomes (Billig, 2000). In a 2007 update to her previous work, Billig states,

Giving young people a say in every phase of a service-learning project has been shown to have a strong influence on [the intended outcomes of] academic and civic engagement.

Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful participation allows them to engage in problem-solving, decision-making, planning, goal-setting, and helping others. [Other researchers have] found that students who were given opportunities for voice … increased their abilities to articulate opinions, began to see themselves as change agents, and developed leadership skills (Billig, 2007, pp. 21–22).

It seems reasonable to expect similar patterns of enhanced results with respect to the wider range of intended outcomes of JSL, but as far as we know, data have not yet been collected and analyzed to fully test this proposition.

Given this understanding of the benefits of youth voice, we believe that JSL projects can benefit from enhanced youth voice in such activities as the following:

- Analyzing community problems and deciding which ones to address and how to address them
- Assessing the efficacy of all phases of projects
- Assessing lessons learned from projects

Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful participation allows them to engage in problem-solving, decision-making, planning, goal-setting, and helping others.

- Providing opportunities for participants to explore the meaning of their experiences from the perspective of Jewish values and traditions
- Reviewing how and why service is a central tenet in Jewish life

Given these benefits, why do we not see more youth voice in both secular and Jewish service-learning? The answers to this question are summarized next.

BARRIERS TO WIDER UTILIZATION OF YOUTH VOICE IN ANY SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAM

Despite these increasingly acknowledged benefits of youth voice, its use has been hampered by a powerful array of barriers, including inertia among educators, the conflict between flexibility and adherence to curriculum, and other practical issues. Yet these barriers can and should be overcome through professional development and other approaches.

Difficulties in moving beyond hierarchical relationships: Teachers, college professors, and leaders of community-based organizations often see their job as being instructors rather than mentors, needing to tell young people what to do and then making sure they do it. In this scenario, young people are seen in passive roles—taking direction, needing to be taught, as vessels to be filled.

Dan Butin (2005; see his article in this issue) calls service-learning "dangerous" because "faculty must reconsider their belief that academic knowledge comes directly from us, in a classroom, based on a written text." It is hard for educators and other adults who view their jobs in this fashion to change their ways of teaching and to treat youth as partners despite what a program model calls for on paper.[1]

Concern for adhering to curricular needs: Educators and others who lead service-learning programs are often uneasy about encouraging youth voice because they feel that taking direction from young people would require moving away from set curricula, making it uncertain how the project will evolve and what it would be likely to accomplish.

Timing and practicality: Many of the examples cited in this article relate to semester-long or year-long courses and curricula that are implemented where young people live or go to school. However, many JSL programs involve shorter, more immersive service to which young people must travel to experience; for example, Alternative Breaks. Some staff argue that in such settings it is simply not possible to avoid advance selection of projects by adults long before the youthful volunteers from another city/town or part of the country show up.

Communities' perceived needs: The tension between youth voice and a community's perceived needs also needs to be recognized and mediated. For example, in some cases, community leaders may be clear about what they want from the volunteers. This can lead to the specification of service-learning projects without the involvement of the youth unless there is an unequivocal commitment to youth voice on the part of service-learning program leadership and efforts are made to ensure that both youth and community have their say.

[1]In theory, this would be less of a problem when adults are newly recruited to serve as teachers, professors, or leaders for immersive service trips. Yet even in these cases, adults often have the traditional models of adult–youth relationships in their minds and may tend to implement them "naturally."

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES IN JEWISH EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

There are at least two ways in which the barriers to youth voice are even more salient for Jewish educators and service trip leaders who seek to expand and deepen participants' Jewish knowledge and commitments.

Competing Purposes

There are a rich set of ideas and values at the heart of Judaism that are expressed in a rich and varied set of Jewish texts developed over two millennia. Unless one pays explicit attention to these values and texts, the reasons for engaging in service-learning tend to be universalistic and ignore their profound importance in Jewish life.

Jewish education, whatever its form or setting, attempts to enable students to understand and see meaning in Jewish ideas and values so that they will continue to engage with them throughout their lives. Providing students with the knowledge from this tradition and the skills to make sense of it often leads to a focus on curriculum and content. This emphasis is not bad per se, but it comes at a cost when the educational approach is experiential.

To ensure that participants "learn" more, Jewish educators tend to develop and refine curricula and programs of instruction. Both devoting time for youth voice and the lack of certainty about where youth voice will lead compete with the understandable instincts of professionals who are deeply committed to the transmission of Jewish knowledge through the study of predetermined texts.

Capacity to Reduce Dependence on Text-based Curriculum

A second barrier relates to professional capacities among Jewish educators and program leaders who face these competing purposes. They can only move away from standardized curricula and protect space in which students' ideas and concerns can be nurtured if they possess several important capacities. They must be excellent observers and listeners who can "hear" what young participants say (and do not say), who can recognize the important issues that are present, and who have the group leadership skills to be able to effectively bring to the surface and address what emerges naturally in the setting.

At the same time, they need Jewish knowledge so that they can appropriately draw on it to relate in a sophisticated way to participants' real-life concerns in "teachable moments." If staff do not have this background, the Jewish element of the experience is either ignored, dealt with superficially, or presented in preselected units that may not relate to the issues that emerge from any encounter.

EVIDENCE THAT YOUTH VOICE CAN BE USED WIDELY

Despite these barriers, the secular service-learning literature shows that they *can* be overcome and that youth voice can be inserted into virtually all aspects of planning and carrying out service-learning projects.

Students can certainly play leadership roles in the service-delivery activities that lie at the heart of service-learning. Yet the experience of America's secular service-learning programs shows that much more is possible, if the adults with responsibility for the programs are willing and able to shift from the traditional adult leadership roles and if the youth involved are selected with an eye to becoming leaders and then receive training on how to best do this. The book

Students as Colleagues (Zlotkowski et al., 2006) illustrates a broad spectrum of ways that youth have played major nontraditional roles in service-learning programs, including such modest examples of student voice as having students serve as staff or staff assistants; it goes on to show how students can be equal partners in program design and administration by sitting as voting members on committees that develop and oversee service-learning on a campus, organizing courses, co-teaching or leading professor-less courses, and running reflection sessions, sometimes without any faculty present. Finally the book describes how students have played a critical role in creating and reshaping the entire service-learning program at a major university. The examples are college-based, but are applicable in a wide range of settings.

In another powerful example of youth voice in service-learning, the State Farm Insurance company has created a Youth Advisory Board in which 30 high school and college-aged youth annually develop a Request for Proposals and then allocate $5 million in service-learning grants from the State Farm Foundation across the United States and Canada (Bailis, 2011). Similar models, notably the Jewish Teen Funders Network sponsored by the Jewish Funders Network, have been developed in Jewish education settings.

Although we have thus far relied primarily on examples of innovative youth voice in the secular service-learning world, two articles in this issue of the *Journal* make it clear that there are also such examples within the JSL field. As Nahma Nadich describes in "Expanding the Definition of Service and Amplifying Youth Voice," the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council started its TELEM program with a traditional curriculum-based foundation, but has expanded the effort to include more student-directed components that focus on students identifying community needs and responding to the needs. This story is as exciting as any in the secular service-learning world.

"Getting Comfortably Uncomfortable: Youth Perspectives on Community Service from the Ma'yan Research Training Interns," by Beth Cooper Benjamin, takes the concept of youth voice in a different, but even more far-reaching, direction: engaging young people in efforts to look at the "big picture" of JSL and assessing the implications of their findings for the future of the field. This article is precisely the kind of youth voice that we have been seeking to highlight. Both of these articles and other examples need to be shared widely to make the point that increasing youth voice in JSL is possible.

FITTING YOUTH VOICE INTO THE JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING CONTEXT

We believe there are few, if any, limits to what young people can do in JSL and the roles they can play.

The Central Role of Reflection

There is one aspect of *any* service-learning effort in which youth voice is indispensable—reflection. As the authors of one of the premier volumes on reflection, *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning: Student Voices and Reflections*, report, "In practice, it is critical reflection, as recognized in the 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act, that provides the transformative link

between the action of *serving* and the ideas and understanding of *learning* (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

Similarly, the *NYLC K–12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice* (n.d.) state that quality service-learning reflection should occur *before, during*, and *after* the service experience have the following objectives:

- Include a variety of verbal, written, artistic, and nonverbal activities to demonstrate understanding and changes in participants' knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes
- Encourage participants to examine their preconceptions and assumptions to explore and understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens
- Encourage participants to examine a variety of social and civic issues related to their service-learning experience so that [they] understand connections to public policy and civic life

It seems obvious that these recommendations are applicable to JSL.

Unsurprisingly, the reflection function is where the most progress appears to have been made in the JSL efforts with which we are familiar. See, for example, the references to reflection in some of the early works about Jewish service-learning such as the 2000 *Jewish Civics—Tikkun Olam/World Repair Manual* (Gopin, 2000) and the thorough discussion of the theory and practice of reflection in the 12-page discussion in *Just: Judaism Action, Social Change* (Kimelman-Block & Menkowitz, 2007).

For quality Jewish service-learning, the second and third objectives must be expanded to include a range of opportunities for the participants to review what Judaism means to them and how service shapes or can shape their Jewish identities and future lives. Decades of research on service-learning confirm the point made by Eyler et al. (1996) that without this kind of reflection, the activities that participants engage in are better described as community service, and not service-learning.

Selecting Projects

Youth voice can also play the key role in selecting the type of service to be provided and the nature of the projects. Many nationally recognized secular service-learning program models, including those developed by Active Citizenship Today (ACT), Earth Force, and the Maine-based Kids Involved in Doing Service (KIDS) Consortium, are built around an approach in which students study a community and then determine which problems are the most pressing and which strategies are most likely to make an impact in addressing the identified problems.[2]

It is admittedly harder to incorporate youth voice into selection of the problem when the short-term service is to be performed in another region or city. Nevertheless, there *are* ways to integrate youth voice into immersive models like Alternative Break programming. Projects might emerge from "courses" in which

Without this kind of reflection, the activities that participants engage in are better described as community service, and not service-learning.

[2]As noted earlier in this article, we recognize that youth voice should not be the only criterion in selecting a project. Clearly representatives of the communities where service projects are carried out also need to be at the table when decisions about selection and nature of projects are made. Ideally youth leaders would be trained to work in coordination with representatives of the host communities on all aspects of service projects, including providing feedback on the effectiveness of the project and next steps to be taken.

youth study a community and its problems and then assess alternative service opportunities in these communities, allowing them to make decisions about which one(s) to pursue. This would make it possible for the students to become advocates for the projects they select and, hence, allow them to play a role in recruiting colleagues and planning follow-up activities.

Assessing Project Effectiveness

Many service-learning research pioneers have advocated for involving service-learning leaders and participants in determining how effective their projects have been (Shumer, 2000) In fact, in some service-learning projects, like the Charleston, South Carolina, Youth as Evaluators program, students develop evaluation skills as a core element of the project (cited in Justinianno & Sherer, 2001).

It is harder to engage youthful participants in program evaluation when they are in immersive JSL projects with short time frames and limited time on-site. Yet evaluation could —and should—be built into planned efforts to follow up on the immersive experiences, thereby providing a link between the off-site follow-up efforts and the powerful memories of the on-site service experiences. Grappling with what "success" means in terms of Jewish education would open up conversations about topics such as the purpose of the learning, identity development, the interaction of doing and learning, and the universalistic and particularistic expressions of service and learning.

Other Possibilities

The examples that we have cited of powerful youth voice in secular and Jewish service-learning projects raise the possibilities of broader youth engagement in planning for the general thrust of future JSL programs. For example, can ways be found to systematically engage graduates of immersive JSL experiences in the program planning processes at organizations such as the American Jewish World Service, Jewish Funds for Justice, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Hillel, and the Union for Reform Judaism, including planning for the follow-up activities after immersive trips? Can youth voice be integrated into efforts to create networks of students who have participated in service trips? Can ways be found to identify student leaders and train them to become partners with adult leaders in carrying out the on-site service and learning experiences and efforts to link the experience to Jewish identity and their future experiences as engaged Jews?

NEXT STEPS: BUILDING ON BOTH SECULAR AND EXISTING MODELS IN JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING

This article raises important issues for the field of Jewish service-learning, but it certainly does not resolve them. We believe two steps are needed to further develop youth voice as an integral part of Jewish service-learning.

First, the ideas presented in the article, although logical, lack a solid research foundation in the JSL field. Research should therefore be conducted on existing JSL programs that explores the extent to which the findings that youth voice contributes substantially to the attainment of student outcomes in the secular service-learning world apply equally well to the unique student outcomes of

Jewish service-learning, such as development of knowledge and integration of service into Jewish identity. Research also needs to be done to explore differences in potential for integrating enhanced youth voice into the different types of Jewish service-learning, such as the short-term, medium-term, and long-term varieties of immersive, university-age JSL programs identified by Irie and Blair (2008) as major JSL modalities.[3]

Second, we think more needs to be done to consider, pilot-test, and assess opportunities to promote enhanced youth voice in JSL programs. For example, efforts should be undertaken to compare traditional programs to those such as the student-directed versions of TELEM described by Nadich to document the benefits that can only be found in the latter.

In sum, both research and experience support the conclusion that enhancing youth voice increases the quality and impact of service-learning projects. There are formidable barriers to expanding its role in both the secular and, even more so, in the JSL worlds. Yet there are also solid examples that demonstrate that the barriers *can* be overcome. We therefore call on JSL program operators and their funders to consider these examples as they plan for the growth of their programs and the field as a whole. It will not be easy to promote greater youth voice in Jewish service-learning while maintaining the integrity of the specifically Jewish content and values. Yet we believe that creative ways to deal with the barriers can be developed so that the volume of youth voice is turned up in ways that make strong programs even stronger.

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[3]It would also be useful to explore the role of youth voice in the related world of young Jewish adult voluntarism that has been recently documented by Fern Chertok and her colleagues (2011).

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Give Youth Voice Now: Youth Voice Techniques and Philosophies for Jewish Service-Learning

Responding to "Turning up the Volume: A Call for More Youth Voice in Jewish Service- Learning"

Rachel **Meytin**

The article, "Turning Up the Volume," concisely illuminates the Jewish community's opportunity to embrace and integrate youth voice into our service-learning programming to the same extent achieved by many secular service-learning frameworks. Although it is true that more research and data are needed, by looking to the secular service-learning community, we can already identify several tactics to use to achieve greater youth voice. Integrating these techniques into the Jewish service-learning experience can make significant strides toward greater ownership and engagement by participants. Additionally, by recognizing when youth voice is and is not a core objective of the service-learning experience, the Jewish educator can unapologetically frame the experience to the participants, regardless of the amount of youth voice in the planning process. Taken together, the Jewish service-learning practitioner is enabled and empowered to improve the experience of the participants at every level.

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