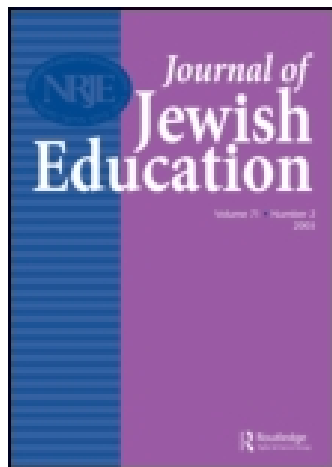


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## **Experiential Jewish Education Has Arrived! Now What?**

JEFFREY S. KRESS

*Experiential Jewish education has been experiencing a time of growth, during which theory development, research, and practice have established a strong voice for the construct. Much of the focus to this point has been on definitions (particularly the distinction between experiential and informal Jewish education) and on outcomes of settings often associated with an experiential Jewish education (EJE) approach. Along with increased understanding of EJE comes the potential to explore a more nuanced set of questions about the nature of educational experiences. This point of development of the field also raises question of the relationship of EJE and the broader field of Jewish education.*

I am honored to write about experiential Jewish education (EJE) for this special anniversary issue, and humbled to speak to colleagues who have far more experience in this area than I. My thoughts on the topic are based on the literature as well as my involvement in studying EJE and training its practitioners. My understanding of EJE was informed by the writings of some of its founding figures (Chazan, 1991, 2003; Reimer, 2003, 2007; Reisman & Reisman, 2002; Reisman, 1979) and those that followed (Bryfman, 2011; Reimer & Bryfman, 2008; Reimer & Shavelson, 2008). These excellent sources have helped lay the theoretical foundation for the development of the field.

The field of EJE has been developing rapidly. In the last decade alone, funding sources have turned their attention to this area, as evident in recent grants by the Jim Joseph Foundation to Hebrew Union College, Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and George Washington University, among others. These institutions, in addition to training educators, have hosted conferences and consultations and published

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articles in a variety of venues to spread the ideas of EJE. The Foundation for Jewish Camp, with its biennial conference, has become a central address for experiential Jewish educators within and beyond the realm of Jewish camping. “Making supplemental school more experiential and/or more like camp” is a familiar rallying cry, enough so as to warrant caution about moving ahead too quickly (Kress, 2012b, 2013). The *Journal of Jewish Education* published a major article on EJE (Reimer, 2007) along with a later issue of responses (Volume 73, Issue 2). It seems safe to say that EJE has arrived.

In this article I will look back briefly on EJE’s past while referring the reader to the reviews and overviews cited above for a full treatment. I will then focus on thinking about EJE’s future in terms of both research questions and conceptual considerations about the status of the field.

### LOOKING BACK: THE “DEFINING” YEARS

It is customary to begin an article with definitions of key terms and concepts. In the case of EJE this is particularly central and challenging. Definitional issues were the focus of the early years of academic treatment of this topic. The most obvious impediment in defining the field is one of nomenclature, with two terms—*informal* and *experiential*—emerging at roughly the same time to describe the same construct. The clearest juxtaposition is Chazan’s (1991, 2003) use of the former term and Reisman’s (1979; Reisman & Reisman, 2002) use of the latter as part of what is described by Reimer (2007, himself using the term “informal”) as the elaboration of the same idea. A further complication has to do with the use of these terms (again, relatively interchangeably) to denote both an *approach* to education, and a *venue* in which education takes place. Authors such as those discussed above were pushing to develop an understanding of the construct, regardless of the term used, as a set of theories and methods. In practice, however, the two terms were often used as shorthand for *nonschool settings* without specific articulation of method. When I entered the field approximately 15 years ago, the statement that a student wanted to study informal/experiential education could have meant either “I want to work in some sort of setting that is not a school” or “I want to put to use a set of methods with certain characteristics.” Often, he or she meant both, demonstrating the close association of method and context. As such, the field was faced with the challenges of: (a) two different terms being used to describe the same construct and, at the same time, (b) the same terms each being used to describe two different constructs.

Reimer and Bryfman (2008) recommend the use of the term *informal* to refer to types of settings, and *experiential* to refer to methodology or approach. While I will use this convention in this article, it would be an overstatement to say that this has become a defining consensus in the field. Bryfman (2011), for example, while agreeing that *experiential* should refer

to a method or approach, prefers the term *nonformal* to describe types of settings and suggests that *informal* refer to “incidental transmission . . . through daily life” (p. 772). Chazan (2007) warns that as the use of the term experiential education comes to be used in place of informal, this can lead to “a misleading linguistic imprecision” (p. 118). Writing in the same special issue of the *Journal of Jewish Education*, however, Dorph (2007) implores us to maintain the informal = setting/experiential = method distinction. I have suggested (Kress, 2012a) that the matter might be better solved by a complete linguistic shift to the use of the term Jewish developmental education to encapsulate the holistic nature of the enterprise. Such an approach would:

focu[s] on Jewish developmental outcomes that encompass knowledge, affect/attitudes, and behavior (including social behavior) and . . . use[] a range of methodologies that include text study, participation in communal rituals, and intra- and interpersonal elements. (Kress, 2012a, p. 135)

Of course, the theorists discussed above did not focus only on nomenclature, but also provided helpful insights into the characteristics of the construct, whatever it might be called. A summary of the terms and concepts associated with EJE theorists is shown in Table 1. Though these theorists differ in their focus and emphasis, there are some recurring ideas about the features that define EJE and that promote its impact, as shown in Table 2. The first of these relates to the goals of ELE, the next seven to what can be seen as defining “active ingredients” that drive learning, and the last to a pedagogic stance on the part of the educator.

Regardless of nomenclature, the past 25–30 years saw a marked increase in interest in the study of the methods of experiential education and the informal settings with which they are often associated. This coincides with increased concern about Jewish continuity and the strong belief that Jewish education could and should play a greater role in promoting an allegiance to Judaism (e.g., Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990), often framed as Jewish identity or Jewish engagement. At the same time, frustration with supplemental school education was growing (e.g., Himmelfarb, 1984; Schoem, 1989). Day schools, though getting more support from the research (e.g., Cohen, 1995; Himmelfarb, 1984), had relatively limited reach within those populations seen as particularly “at risk.” Informal settings and experiential approaches offered a viable third option. The blossoming of EJE, with its goals of the identity development of participants, arguably at the extent of “substance and cognition” (Sales, 2014), can also be seen as consistent with trends in the Jewish community toward an increasingly individualistic and personalized (or self-defined) manifestation of Jewish identity (Cohen & Eisen, 2000).

**TABLE 1.** Nomenclature and core concepts.

Theorists	Term(s) used	Core concepts and quotations	Note
Reisman (1979)	Experiential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beginning with the needs of the participants</li><li>• Creating group contexts in which individual and group learning is promoted</li><li>• Developing a trusting atmosphere</li><li>• Encouraging participants to explore and clarify their Jewish value [sic] and commitments</li></ul>	As articulated by Reimer (2007, p. 8)
Chazan (2003)	Informal	In addition to the concepts articulated by Reisman, above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Centrality of experience</li><li>• In a curriculum of Jewish experiences and values</li><li>• That creates a culture of Jewish education</li><li>• Is facilitated by a holistic Jewish educator</li></ul>	As articulated by Reimer (2007, p. 8)
Reimer (2003)	Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do not confuse the program with the experiences.</li><li>• Your primary task is to set a challenging, but safe trail.</li><li>• But stick around for the meaningful conversations.</li><li>• And for learning's sake, don't forget the follow-up.</li></ul>	Source: Reimer (2003)
Reimer (2007)	Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Socialization is a necessary first step.</li><li>• What lies beyond socialization is the <i>creative step of going deeper</i>: [italics in original]</li></ul>	Reimer (2007, pp. 11 & 19)
Reimer and Bryfman (2008)	Informal and experiential, with different meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We therefore suggest that “informal Jewish education” be used as a broad umbrella term that refers to the familiar settings of Jewish education outside of school. We will use “experiential Jewish education” as the term to describe what educators do to promote experientially-based Jewish learning.</li><li>• EJE operates on three distinct “initiatives”: recreational, socialization, and challenge.</li></ul>	Reimer and Bryfman (2008, p. 344)

Bryfman (2011)	Various	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Formal education</u>: a “structured system” of which “Jewish schools . . . are the paradigmatic examples.”</li><li>• <u>Nonformal education</u>: settings that focus on “deliberate and systematic learning” but are “less traditional.” Examples include camps and youth groups.</li><li>• <u>Informal education</u>: “incidental transmission . . . through daily lived experiences.”</li><li>• <u>Experiential education</u>: “transactional process . . . that allows learners to directly experience, and reflect upon these experiences.”</li></ul>	Bryfman (2011, pp. 771–772)
Kress (2012a, 2012b)	Jewish developmental education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Characterized by attention to the affective and interpersonal elements of both the educational situation and educational;</li><li>• Opportunities for consideration of identity created through involvement “in new experiences, dialogical interactions, and facilitated self-reflection.”</li></ul>	Kress (2012a, p. 135)

TABLE 2. Core characteristics of EJE.

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1. A focus on <i>holistic Jewish developmental goals</i> that encompass not just what one knows about Judaism, but also how one feels and what one does, as encapsulated by terms such as identity, engagement or socialization
2. The use of an activity, particularly one that is interpersonal and seen as engaging or fun
3. Attention to social and emotional dynamics as central to the success of the educational endeavor
4. Learner centeredness, as manifested in the adaptability of the program according to the needs, interests, passions, etc., of the participants
5. Scaffolded opportunities for reflection
6. Ideally, some continuity of experience, as opposed to “one shot” programs
7. The incorporation of challenge as a vehicle for learning and growth
8. A stance of <i>facilitation</i> , as opposed to one more didactic, on the part of the educator

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It is important to note that though the terms experiential/informal Jewish education came into common discourse in the last decades of the previous century; the concept of experiential education and learning, and the importance of the informal settings often associated with them, has a much longer history. Theorists trace the intentional practice of experiential education to ancient Greece (Jeffs & Smith, 2008) and, in a more contemporary vein, to John Dewey (1938). Threads of informal Jewish education can be seen in this *Journal* as early as its first volume. Many of the “national organizations . . . clubs . . . and national student bodies,” such as Young Judaea and the Hillel Foundation, listed under the heading of *extension education* would be included on a contemporary list of informal settings (Edidin, 1929, p. 173).

LOOKING AHEAD: RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR EXPERIENTIAL  
JEWISH EDUCATION

In this section I discuss questions that can conceivably be addressed through empirical research and/or have ramifications for research methods. I do not take issue with, nor will I reiterate, calls for research that were included in the reviews and overviews cited in the previous section. In fact, I take as a jumping off point Bryfman’s (2011) call for efforts to unify our understanding, and assessment, of the outcomes of EJE and I note the progress made in this regard (Cousens, 2013), though methodological implications need to be further developed. An important complement to better articulating *outcomes* would be to consider how we can develop a deeper understanding of the *inputs* by paying more attention to the independent variables in addition to the dependent.

## Considering Inputs and Independent Variables: What Are We Studying?

Up to this point, research in the area of EJE has focused heavily on the impact of certain informal settings. The independent variable in such cases generally has to do with participation versus nonparticipation. We have asked questions such as “does camp work” (Cohen, Miller, Sheskin, & Torr, 2011) or what is the impact of Birthright (e.g., Saxe, Kadushin, Kelner, Rosen, & Yereslove, 2002). These questions have been important in helping to establish the impact of such informal venues, and the experiential methods associated with them, as serious and effective, and have helped EJE (and informal settings) achieve prominence.

Though we know about informal settings in broad strokes, we know much less about the actual education that goes on in such settings and how the methods and approaches relate to outcomes. A deeper understanding of the actual education and learning that takes place within these informal settings would result from looking at variables that cut across categories of settings; we should consider other ways of slicing the pie. The core characteristics of EJE listed previously (Table 2) can serve as a starting point, and we can focus on developing measures and methods to assess each of these “inputs” (e.g., the quality of relationships among participants and between participants and facilitators). Such measures would allow for comparison across types-of-settings of these postulated “active ingredients.” The examination of EJE practice *in situ* helps us directly understand what education is happening, rather than relying on an assumption that just because a setting is informal, quality EJE is taking place.

While we have focused on iterating a common language for outcomes, we can also be looking at a common rubric for inputs. In a similar vein, I have attempted to articulate components of quality EJE programs by extrapolating from observations of day-school-based *Shabbatonim* (Kress, 2012a). It may be possible for these components, with some setting-specific adaptation, be developed into instruments to better assess the actual experiential practice going on in a setting. Likewise, we draw from the core components (Table 2) as the basis for such a rubric of inputs (Table 3).

Given the array of venues that fall under the informal/experiential heading, there are numerous other ways—beyond participation versus nonparticipation—to group these for comparison of practice across settings in order to better understand the actualization of the theories and methods of EJE.

A few examples include:

- Comparing experiences that are part of a formal setting (e.g., a day school or supplemental *Shabbaton*) with self-contained informal settings (that is, those not linked to a formal setting) to explore, for example, the role of



**TABLE 3.** Category headings for rubric of components of quality EJE.

Component	Example/description
Logistics relationships	Modification of schedule to meet emerging needs among participants, and between participants and staff
Participant leadership	Participants involved in planning and leading activities
Ritual	To be done in engaging fashion that is appropriate for the diversity of religious approaches
Spirituality	Positive energy, and also facilitated reflection
Programmatic/developmental elements	Educational opportunities appropriate to skill level of learners

*Note.* Source: Kress, 2012a.

- expectations and preconceptions participants bring to each type of setting and the effect these have on the experience and its impact.
- The nature (and/or explicitness) of the goals vis-à-vis Jewish growth, such as the relative emphasis on affective identity building as opposed to “content” learning. For example, a trip up Masada can be emphasized as an opportunity to learn about the history of the place and/or a chance to reflect on one’s connection to the Jews of the past.
  - Settings can also be grouped by the nature of the experience. For example, we can compare those that (a) revolve around direct participation in Jewish ritual (e.g., prayer); (b) involve a direct experience with more distal Jewish connection (as a basic example, in the aforementioned Masada trip, participants are directly experiencing climbing the mountain and “being there,” but not, of course, experiencing the actual events of Masada); (c) make use of some sort of simulation; and (d) add a Jewish lens to activities that participants may do anyway without the Jewish lens (e.g., a walk in the woods).

A deeper understanding of EJE can be gained from moving away from binary questions of efficacy (e.g., “Does X approach work or not?”). As a doctoral student, I was influenced by an article that argued for researchers to ask questions about “under what conditions” a phenomenon occurs or a relationship exists, rather than whether or not a phenomenon occurs or relationship exists at all (Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1986). Such a question could be helpful in framing research in EJE, suggesting that we look at potential mediators of outcomes.

To start with, *learner characteristics* might influence the experience of, and/or gains from, EJE. This inquiry can be structured around the core characteristics of EJE listed above (Table 2). As we emphasize emotions, social

dynamics, and participant empowerment, are there subgroups that might get left behind, or who might be turned off? Gender, for example, may be relevant. Warren (1998) points to the potential for alienation of women and minorities in outdoor education. Sommers (2013) claims that “[a]s our schools have become more feelings-centered, risk-averse, collaboration-oriented and sedentary, they have moved further and further from boys’ characteristic sensibilities” (para. 12). Though she is writing specifically about education in formal settings, her references to the social and emotional elements of education and their potential to detract from the experiences of boys are relevant here. Similarly, personality traits such as introversion/extroversion are worth considering as mediating variables, particularly in an educational approach that works so deeply with inter- and intra-personal issues.

There are also important questions related to the experiential Jewish educator. Such questions are particularly relevant given increased efforts to develop a cadre of educators trained in the theory and practice of EJE. Are credentialed/trained experiential Jewish educators more successful in promoting learner outcomes than are innately talented but “naïve” (that is, untrained) educators? More descriptively, what, if any, do these two groups actually do differently in educational situations? What similarities and differences might exist in their responses to actual (or, in a research paradigm, hypothetical) challenging situations? What elements of educator preparation seem to come into play and in what way? Similar comparisons can be done for those trained specifically in *experiential* Jewish education compared with Jewish (and/or general) education more broadly. And, finally, similar questions can be asked about the nature of the core Jewish competencies of the educator. How do educators’ degree of Hebrew fluency, for example, come into play in their work? Are there differences in the functioning of someone with a broad and deep command of traditional Jewish texts as compared to those without?

In conclusion, efforts to better articulate the outcomes of experiential education and informal settings should go hand in hand with different ways of studying the inputs. As researchers, we should not take type-of-setting (e.g., camp, youth group) as the “implicit” (to use Sale’s, 2014, term) starting point for the study of EJE. Rather, a better understanding of the construct can be gained by exploring its elements and components, even as these cut across settings.

This focus on cross-setting factors should not be taken to preclude accounting for type-of-setting in our work. Educational (e.g., Ball, 2007; Schwab, 1978) and developmental (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) theorists emphasize the interconnectedness and mutual impact of the various elements of the educational ecology, not their separation. Further, while we can talk about the characteristics of EJE as generally relevant across settings, their manifestation will differ across settings as will the implementation issues involved in their actualization. For example, the answer to the above question about

Hebrew fluency would likely vary across settings. Further, on the surface a day school's *Shabbaton* may look a lot like that of a supplemental school, and both may be hard to distinguish from a youth group's. Yet, we can wonder if the experience of the learner varies due to variation among the setting in factors such as the power dynamics between leaders and participants, the participants' emotional preassociations with the various settings, the preexisting quality of relationships, or the perceived connection (or lack thereof) of the *Shabbaton* to other developmental contexts in the participants' lives. Implementation differs among settings on even more basic levels. For example, there are issues involved in educator-learner relationships (e.g., boundary issues) that play out differently in a day school and a camp setting.

### Learning and Memory

The impact or outcome of an experience, of course, remains a central concern to both researchers and practitioners, and there are fundamental questions that need to be addressed. Again, my intention is to move the dialogue beyond the effectiveness of particular types of settings. To begin with, we can ask whether the participants' "experience" of an experience is what we assume it to be. I am not speaking about whether participants are learning or taking away from the experience what we hope they will; my interest is at an even more basic level. Experiential educators often describe environmentally based, indirect efforts. The use of Hebrew terms during sports games and activities, for example, or signs in Hebrew and English, or rooms named for famous Jewish figures—"We need to be in *Chadar Rambam* in *eser dakot* for a *peulah*." At the most basic level, this may result in gains in knowledge; campers may learn that *tzrif* means bunk by hearing it used and using it themselves. However, I have yet to meet an educator who says that knowing the Hebrew word for "bunk" is, in and of itself, particularly meaningful (after all, it has limited out-of-camp application). Rather, such environmental approaches are meant to send a message (e.g., about the importance of Hebrew language), and/or set a tone (e.g., of seriousness of purpose vis-à-vis Judaic learning), and/or provide an entry point for more learning, as in Seltzer's (2013) discussion of Hebrew at camp as a means "to make [campers'] transitions into their Jewish tradition fluid and seamless" (para. 10).

I find all of these explanations to be very plausible, but based on assumptions about how the participants process this environmental information. Do (or, under what conditions do) specific interventions generalize into broader understandings? Do participants construct their environment, fitting together these educational pieces, in the way we think they do? For example, when students use the term *marp* at camp, to what extent are they even processing this as a short form of a Hebrew word, never mind making

broader associations to Hebrew in their lives? These questions are salient given research pointing to limitations of unguided learning in creating the long-term memories that mediate impactful education (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).

Relatedly, we can ask about content learning in EJE. What Jewish knowledge or skills are actually gained through EJE experience, and how does this intersect with identity-promotion? This is particularly relevant given concerns about EJE being “content light” (Sales, 2014) and mixed results in general education when experiential methods are used to address specific content issues (compare, for example: Ives & Obenchain, 2006; Kirschner et al., 2006; Rymarz, 2007; Van Eynde & Spencer, 1988).

A unique set of questions relates to memory, a central element of learning. As a personal example, I do not remember much about my early educational experiences. I do, however, remember a lesson about evaporation (I believe in first or second grade): The teacher showed us a large rock that she said was shaped like Staten Island, where this story takes place (not knowing the shape of Staten Island, who were we to argue?). She put the rock into a pan of water and pointed to where some of the landmarks would be (I remember her showing the location of the bridges . . .). A few days later, she showed us that the rock was still where we left it, but the water was gone. We offered possible explanations (Was it absorbed by the rock? Did the custodian pour it out over the weekend?), and the teacher used this as an entry point for talking about evaporation. *Why in the world do I remember that?* It seems unlikely that it was the only time the teacher used an engaging demonstration of an idea. I have no particular emotional connection with, or interest in, the concept of evaporation. I do not believe I was ever subsequently asked to reflect on the demonstration. In fact, I have no recollection of the actual lesson about evaporation, just the demonstration that led up to it. This personal story frames my next question of interest: What is actually recalled from Jewish educational experiences, and what accounts for this? This seems different than asking about what is learned, though they are related. Rather, I wonder about the elements of an experience which serve as markers that make memories accessible years later, and cues in later experiences that open the door to memories of past EJE. It would be interesting to explore the “mystery” described so eloquently by Reimer (2001):

There is a mystery here that we barely understand. The human mind registers certain experiences in lasting ways while other experiences are scarcely remembered. Some experiences – especially when something happens to leave a lasting “memory trace” – are often remembered years later when more routine experiences have long been forgotten. (p. 2)

The recent blossoming of technology raises some exciting opportunities and basic questions relevant to EJE. Approaches such as gaming have

been explored for their educational potential (e.g., Gottlieb, 2011), and can be further developed and assessed. Further, technology is a factor that can impact the actual educational dynamics within any given experience (Saljo, 2010). For example, the ability to be in constant contact in numerous ways with friends and group facilitators both far and near can change the social dynamics of a group. It can create a much more porous sense of time and space. As we check our work emails before we turn out the lights to sleep, we know too well that the ubiquity of technology can make it difficult to know when an experience is “over.” If EJE participants are in frequent contact with peers and facilitators from around the world, can we say a particular program has “ended?” This can bring both benefits and challenges to EJE (as it does for employees). Relationships and connections made in a program can be extended, keeping the program “alive” in the minds of participants. There may also be a risk of participants feeling that educators, in their attempts to facilitate online interaction, may be overreaching. At the same time that technology enhances relationship building, the lack of boundedness of experiences may dampened the willingness and sense of safety needed to “try on” new identities and actions in informal settings (see Jackson, 1995 for a discussion of identity and social context).

Technological innovation has brought a ubiquity and immediacy to photography and video. Photographing (or videoing) and “curating” one’s experience has become de rigor (Potter, 2012). Posing for a picture, taking a picture, viewing the picture, and sharing the picture (or video) happen repeatedly in real time, in the midst of an experience. What is the impact on how any given educational moment is experienced by the participant? Does the act of creating an ongoing digital record serve as a sort of reflective tool, calling upon participants to attend more closely—thereby, assumedly, processing more deeply—the experience? Or does it remove the participant from the moment and divert attention from the programmatic focus, as setting up the picture becomes as important as the actual experience within which the picture is being taken? As a parallel, consider the now-not-uncommon practice of “curating” one’s meal by posting pictures and reviews. Even if we do not revisit our review in the future, the meal may be more memorable because we took the time to reflect on it as it was happening. At the same time, however, because our attention was actively engaged with creating the record of our meal, we might not have taken as much time to notice elements of it. Emerging research (Henkel, 2014) finds that those who are asked to photograph an experience recall fewer details than those who were not. The fact that Henkel’s (2014) study was conducted in a museum, a context generally included under the heading of informal education, reinforces the relevance of the question to the current discussion. Commenting on her findings, Henkel suggests that a “photo-taking impairment effect” occurs because when we “count on these external memory devices, we’re taking away from the kind of mental cognitive processing that might help

us actually remember” an experience (National Public Radio [NPR], 2014). A similar set of questions can be asked about the creation of verbal records in real time, such as posting on Facebook and Twitter.

## Contextual Considerations

There are questions about EJE that are prompted by the contemporary context in which it takes place, what Bronfenbrenner (1979) might refer to as the *macrosystem* of EJE. Though they may not lend themselves to empirical study, these questions about underlying assumptions do have methodological ramifications.

First, the outcomes, and associated methods, of EJE seem to be predicated on a reflective, self-aware approach to identity. Researchers, myself among them, have conceptualized and operationalized identity as developed through the creation of life-narratives that can be verbally related to researchers (Kress, 2010). In terms of EJE programming, this manifests in the centrality of reflection (Reimer, 2003). Perhaps counter-intuitively, the idea of apprenticeship (Rogoff, Matusav, & White, 1998) or legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which learning occurs by doing together (but not necessarily reflecting on this), is generally not part of the discourse of EJE. Rather, it seems mostly related to Bryfman’s (2011) definition of *informal* education (which is different than the definition of the term used throughout this article). In fact, much of the discourse of EJE relates to stepping *out* of the experience to reflect back upon it (the “education,” in such an analysis, is as much in reflectively connecting prayer to self as much as in actually praying). We tailor our EJE experiences to include certain elements that pull for introspection and the conscious connection of self and activity (for example, meditation or personal journaling added to prayer experiences). Conversely, some Jewish educational “experiences” may be written out of EJE if they do not meet certain reflective criteria. A more didactic, rote approach to text might, particularly in certain segments of the community, seem to be a more “authentic” experience than making *midrash* out of torn papers and reflecting on the process, but the latter would arguably be seen more squarely within the framework of EJE. Our conceptualization of identity values the ability to reflectively discuss aspects of self, as opposed to seeing identity as expressed in the adherence to certain norms and expectations even without reflection on these. In part, this may have to do with the disconnection of many contemporary Jews from communities of Jewish practice; situated learning must occur within a community in which to be situated.

This assumption is reflected in the prevalence of research methods based on the ability to report one’s identity (though interviews, narrative, and surveys) rather than relying on external communal indicators. Recent work

on the topic of implicit identity, or “processes that occur outside conscious awareness” (Devos & Banaji, 2003), offers a challenge to an identity-as-self-knowledge approach. This construct may be particularly relevant given that “[e]valuations of one’s self . . . may be influenced by group membership, even though the individual is not aware of such influence” (Devos & Banaji, 2003, p. 179). Emerging methodologies in this area, though not universally embraced, might help bridge the gap between narrative reports of identity and “checklist” surveys of participation in Jewish ritual.

A final contextual question has to do with the nature of EJE as the field becomes more self-aware and works more actively, or dare I say “formally,” to develop experiential methodologies and to bring informal Jewish education to a wider audience. Might there be certain effects—positive or negative—caused by the increasing “dosage” of experiential education and participation in informal settings? On the positive side, there is the potential power of a growing ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of experiential education and informal settings. What synergies can be developed among different settings and the experiences had within those? How might multiple settings coordinate activity so that the “‘curriculum’ of Jewish values” (Chazan, 2003) is implemented across participation settings?

The ascendance of these methods and settings, however, may bring iatrogenic effects. It has been remarked that the impact of an EJE/informal setting approach is augmented by a sense that one is stepping *outside* the norm and can therefore experiment with beliefs and identity. What happens when such experiences *become* the norm? Will Birthright, for example, still have the same impact once it becomes something of a community expectation or norm that (a) one participates and that (b) one is changed by the experience? Or, as camps embrace an educational mission, can they do this in a way that does not turn off participants by diminishing their perception of “freedom?”

Up to this point, I have focused mainly on questions that could conceivably, at least in theory, be addressed by empirical research, or that relate directly to empirical methodology. I now turn to questions that have more to do with the status of the field as a whole.

### LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE AND THE “FIELD”

It is fairly incontrovertible that EJE has proven its right to sit at the educational “adult table,” to play in the big leagues. Multiple programs are rigorously training practitioners. Formal and informal settings have increased their intentional use of EJE, moving beyond the assumption that such education can be left to occur naturally. It is becoming commonplace for schools, camps, and communal organizations to have a position related to implementing experiential Jewish programming. New informal settings are



emerging, expanding the current reach of camps, Israel trips, etc. Birthright has become ubiquitous. The Foundation for Jewish Camp's conference and training programs are organizers for camps and beyond. *Now what?*

The articulation of theory and the publication of research has helped foster EJE's growth, and has, in turn, been fed by it. It is possible for this field to continue to develop and to aim for the further establishment of characteristics of a mature field—such as its own journal, society, conferences, etc. But the fact that this is possible does not mean that it is desirable. Should we try to further differentiate and develop EJE as a distinct field, or rather work to make porous the boundaries between EJE and the field of Jewish education writ large? There are conceptual and strategic arguments on both sides.

Many of the arguments for maintaining and even increasing the separateness of the field of EJE have been alluded to throughout this article. It has been a very productive few decades! Conceptually, an array of important articles has pointed to characteristics of experiential education that help set it apart. Educators in supplemental and day schools have worked to develop innovative applications of experiential techniques. Those working as experiential Jewish educators have come to see themselves as *professionals*. Practitioners and participants are drawn to the excitement of an emerging field, particularly one that allows them to address their “general” passions (e.g., the environment, arts, social justice) within the scope of Jewish education. The maintenance of the momentum of this powerful form of education is a strong argument for continuing to develop EJE as distinct from Jewish education in general.

Conceptual concerns, however, arise from questions of whether EJE is sufficiently distinct to warrant its development into an individual field. This may seem like an odd line of questioning given the discussion up to this point of definitions of EJE and areas of inquiry related to it. Clearly, there is something about the confluence of the array of core characteristics of EJE listed previously (Table 2) that feels unique and special. We know it (and its absence) when we see it.

As our embrace of EJE widens, however, the turf staked out by manifestations of “non-EJE” is in retreat. The straw men that often emerge as education-that-is-not-experiential are “a lecture” or “rote learning.” Attacks on these straw men are not new; the entire endeavor of rote learning-for-remembering has been questioned by general education theorists speaking broadly about the field (e.g., Mayer, 2002). Theorists (Jeffs & Smith, 2008), including myself (Kress, 2012a), have suggested that experiential and non-experiential be understood as existing on a continuum rather than as orthogonal constructs. To the extent to which EJE is defined by those core characteristics listed earlier, however, it is not clear whether the opposite pole represents some distinct form or theory of education, or simply education that is less likely to be impactful.



I am not suggesting that we should avoid trying to describe and understand EJE. I wonder, though, whether it continues to be useful to draw distinctions between EJE and Jewish education in general. In fact, many of the ideas and theories of EJE mesh strongly with general theories of education and development. It may be telling that while there is (somewhat) of a consensus around the use of the terms *informal* and *experiential*, and there is likewise agreement that *formal* is the term used as the opposite of *informal*, there does not seem to be a term popularly used to describe that-which-is-not experiential.

The core characteristics of EJE listed earlier (Table 2) can be strongly linked to practices recommended for education in general, “experiential” or not. For example, the idea of *challenge* has become a popular concept in the field (Bryfman, 2008; Reimer & Bryfman, 2008). Challenge, as defined by Reimer and Bryfman (2008), refers not only to physical accomplishments but also to challenges to one’s relationship to Judaism, to beliefs and assumptions. In a similar vein, Bekerman (2007, p. 238) refers to opinions being “destabilized” in experiential education and Fox (1989, p. 24) describes the “disequilibrium” caused by encountering new experiences at Jewish overnight camp. To Jarvis (2008), learning occurs from “disjunctures” between new experiences and accepted beliefs or assumptions. But while challenge may categorize EJE, it also characterizes effective education in general. Irving Sigel (Copple, Sigel, & Saunders, 1979; Sigel, Kress, & Elias, 2007; Sigel, 1993), among others, has translated Piagetian theories of schema-change into ideas about how learning occurs. New experiences are processed in light of existing understandings, attitudes, and beliefs. Discrepancies create a challenge to existing schemas that is resolved through the processes of adaptation (assimilation and accommodation). To Sigel (1993), effective educators use a variety of strategies to “distance” learners from current schema in order to foster change.

Similarly, the emphasis on socioaffective dynamics in the learning process, also a core idea of EJE, is part of broad educational discourse. One underpinning of this approach is the understanding that the cognitive and socioaffective elements of learning are intertwined. This idea took root in educational settings through theorists and practitioners of social and emotional learning who developed curricula and school-wide interventions to more intentionally address holistic growth (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; Elias et al., 1997; Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002). Moreover, research has even tied socioaffective elements of the learning environment to gains in the acquisition of content in classrooms (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). This movement has been catalyzed by the increased prominence of brain research in the discourse of education and findings of interrelatedness of cognitive and affective process (Jensen, 1998). Roberts (2002) points out that implications emerging from such research (such as the centrality of reflection and

attention to emotions in the learning process) are also central elements of experiential education. There is a compelling, though admittedly reductionist, logic to the argument: if this is how the brain works, then similar methods should be used in any learning activity.

We can also question the uniqueness of the holistic, socialization goals of EJE. Though they may differ in their description of the priorities and details *socialization*, used by Reimer and Bryfman (2008) in the sense of bringing one into a society (akin to acculturation), sits squarely within the visions of Jewish education of multiple theorists (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003). We can see this applying even to prototypically nonexperiential practitioners. A classroom teacher in a day school drilling students on the past pluperfect tense of Hebrew verbs is not doing so in a vacuum, but rather out of her and/or the school's vision that mastery of the language is an important part of being a Jew. The lecturer on medieval Jewish history at a synagogue-based adult education forum is not there to relate disembodied facts, but rather to convey a sense of the audience's history as Jews. Without the socialization element it would be difficult to use "Jewish" as a descriptor of the education. A lecture as part of a college World Religions class may be *about* Judaism, but it is questionable whether this is *Jewish education*.

The idea that the characteristics of EJE are not *unique* to EJE has even been asserted by its early theorists, who emphasize that EJE involves the interplay of these factors rather than any one individually. I agree that there is a certain feel to the successful confluence of these factors (we easily place the aforementioned Hebrew grammar drills into the non-EJE category). At the same time, however, I wonder about whether this warrants its own field. In questioning the distinctiveness of EJE, I am not arguing against the importance of the ideas represented by the construct. In fact, I would argue that these elements are so important as to call for application more broadly to the extent that it overlaps almost entirely with "good" Jewish education. I would like to call for *more* attention by all Jewish educators (and general educators, for that matter) to the factors iterated by Reisman, Chazan, Reimer, and Bryfman.

Dewey (e.g., 1938) and Vygotsky (e.g., 1978) are often cited among the intellectual progenitors of experiential education. When I first encountered the work of these authors as a graduate student in psychology, I read them through the lens of "how people learn" as opposed to "how one should teach." I saw their theories as descriptive (though I did appreciate their prescriptive ramifications) and generally applicable to learning. That is, I did not understand Vygotsky as saying that *sometimes* people learn through sociocultural mechanisms; I saw it as a statement of reality as he understood it. Likewise, I did not see Dewey's emphasis on experience as applicable at certain places and times. Learning, according to Dewey *is* experience-based (with reflection, under certain conditions, etc.). If one ascribes strongly to a theory of learning, why would one assume that that theory is relevant only

at certain times or places? And, if we take this modality of learning seriously, then education should be based on it. True, it could be that the actions of educators might not always match the ideals emerging from the theory, but that does not negate the relevance of that learning approach. One might fail “to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (Dewey, 1938, p. 40) but that does not compel us to create a category to describe these efforts.

Of course, there are educators who plunge ahead with rote memorization (or similar methods) and care not at all for the motivational, social, and emotional dynamics of the learning experience. They have poor relationships with their students, who in turn feel disconnected from the teacher, their peers, the setting, and the material. I would assert that such an approach is unlikely to achieve the broadly defined goals of contemporary Jewish education or even, for that matter, the goals of lasting rote memorization.

In fact, this scenario raises the question of why we would accept that *any* educator would ignore the core components of impactful experiences, or why we would train them to do so. Rather, we could imagine that even lecture or memorization-based education would benefit from incorporating core characteristics of EJE. Might a lecturer, for example, use narrative to connect ideas with the lives of learners, or pause for those in attendance to reflect (individually or with a neighbor) on what they heard? Might an educator scaffold memorization by helping learners develop ways to personalize the process (through making a song, for example)? And, might learners be willing to participate in, or at least put up with, occasional “boring” activities if they have developed a close, trusting relationship with the educator?

The conceptual similarities between EJE and non-EJE highlight the risk that othering the former construct allows some arenas, or some educators, to see themselves as exempt from the generalizable best practices associated with it. In my own work with “experiential” elements of “formal” day school settings (Kress, 2012a), I found that the co-curricular, non-classroom-based (e.g., trips, *Shabbatonim*, prayer experiences) elements of the day school are often referred to as the *experiential* elements, while work in the classroom was often described as *formal*. However, theorists in Jewish (Epstein & Kress, 2011) and general education (Wurdinger, 2005) point out that experiential methods are useful in classrooms as well as out.

Interestingly, a similar viewpoint also been espoused in the world of general experiential education. Roberts (2002), writing in the *Journal of Experiential Education* (of all places!), argues that if we fail to move experiential education further into the mainstream there is the risk of it becoming seen as “a program (like field trips, ropes courses, and character education) to be implemented in schools” rather than “a broader pedagogical foundation from which to work” (p. 284). Of course, we should continue to embrace manifestations of experiential education that are “alternative,”

innovative, etc. Wilderness adventures, camp, trips, and the like are all important, but they are settings in which the active elements of education may play out (or not, the fact that an activity happens in the wilderness does not guarantee the presence of sound educational practice); they themselves are not the active elements.

In conclusion, my strategic concern in further institutionalizing experiential education is that of perpetuating the idea that educational elements like those above only apply at certain times, to certain approaches to education, to some educators, or in certain places. If some professionals *are* experiential Jewish educators, and therefore should be considering holistic goals, and making use of the power of deep integration of reflection, emotions, social dynamics, etc. in their work, the implicit implication is that some *are not*. If we believe in the power of an experiential approach, then perhaps we need instead to think about how better to translate elements of our subfield so that they better infuse the whole.

### Thinking About a Way Forward: Re-Embrace the Power of “Informal”

Based on the previous discussion, there seem to be benefits in both stressing the ubiquitous application of experiential methods while at the same time capitalizing on the momentum and excitement that have drawn participants, educators, and funders to the field. I argued above for moving beyond a focus on type-of-setting as an organizing factor in research. Paradoxically, when it comes to questions about field-building, type-of-setting (or informal as opposed to experiential terminology) might be helpful. Funding institutions and staff training programs can build on the excitement and energy associated with different varieties of settings rather than a conceptual difference of educational theory. Interestingly, attempts to organize in this way have achieved success, as evidenced by setting (or topic) specific organizations and conferences—such as the FJC’s “camp conference,” the I-Center’s emergence of a hub for Israel education, and the annual day school conference. We can see EJE as crucial to all and any Jewish educational endeavor. Its manifestation, the nuts and bolts of implementation on the ground, may differ among type of setting and therefore may be a more defensible line of demarcation that allows for momentum around topics such as camping, or Israel trips, etc. while stressing the universality of the core characteristics of EJE.

## CONCLUSION

We are at a critical point in the maturation of EJE. The early developmental struggles to articulate definitions and the subsequent outcomes studies of

“informal” settings allowed EJE to rightfully claim a seat at the Jewish educational table. It has, as Bryfman (2011) put it, reached its tipping point. The past decade can be seen as an adolescence or early adulthood of sorts. EJE experienced an organizational “growth spurt” in terms of the involvement of funders and the proliferation of training programs. It established an identity of nomenclature and definitions. Now, as an “adult” it is time for EJE to take a lead role. Paradoxically, it may be most successfully doing that by widening the tent rather than strongly demarcating barriers.

Bridging EJE more strongly back to Jewish education in general should not detract from its importance, or that of the questions of “what we don’t know.” In fact, the challenges raised by Ewert and Sibthorp (2009) in terms of developing evidence-based practice for experiential education can inform our broader approach to Jewish education research. These authors outline the potential confounding variables that cloud inferences from research about educational experiences, categorizing these sequentially. Participants bring *precursor* variables into all educational experiences—including their demographics, the factors that led to their self-selection, and their prior experiences. *Concomitant* variables include elements of an experience which can derail even the most well-conceived plans. Negative group dynamics, poor fidelity of implementation, and the like can mediate outcomes. Finally, results of research could be influenced by *postexperience* factors. Participants may be on a postexperience high, or hesitant to criticize a program because of warm feelings for a facilitator. While framed as methodological advice, these ideas caution against a narrow delineation of “experiential” education. Our educational efforts, whether in formal or informal settings, one-shot or immersive, may seem atomized to us. *We* (researchers, practitioners, and policy makers) might seek to isolate a certain type of education—or an approach, or a method, or a venue—but the idea of an “experience” only holds real validity from the vantage point of the learner. We have made progress in delineating the areas of experiential and informal Jewish education. We should not let these definitions and boundaries, however, hinder our efforts to understand Jewish educational *experiences* themselves and how they are actually *experienced* by the participant. Development is a holistic, continuous process. Educational efforts to promote Jewish development should be as well.

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