

JEWISH EDUCATION FORUM:
CULTURAL DISSONANCE AND THE
JEWISH SCHOOL

SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street
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THE JEWISH COMMUNAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

The Jewish Communal Affairs Department is one of the major national program departments of the American Jewish Committee. To achieve its overall goal to improve the quality of Jewish life and secure Jewish continuity, the Department engages in planning programs of research, publication and action in five major areas. These include: the dynamics and maintenance of Jewish identity; the Jewish family (the Department created the William Petschek National Jewish Family Center in 1979); Jewish education at every level (in 1974 it founded the college level Academy for Jewish Studies); the communal involvement of Jewish academics; Israel and Jewish communities in other parts of the world.

The JCAD implements its objectives through commissioned research, conferences, publications, leadership training, consultation services, demonstration projects, and preparation of program guidelines for AJC chapters and other Jewish agencies.

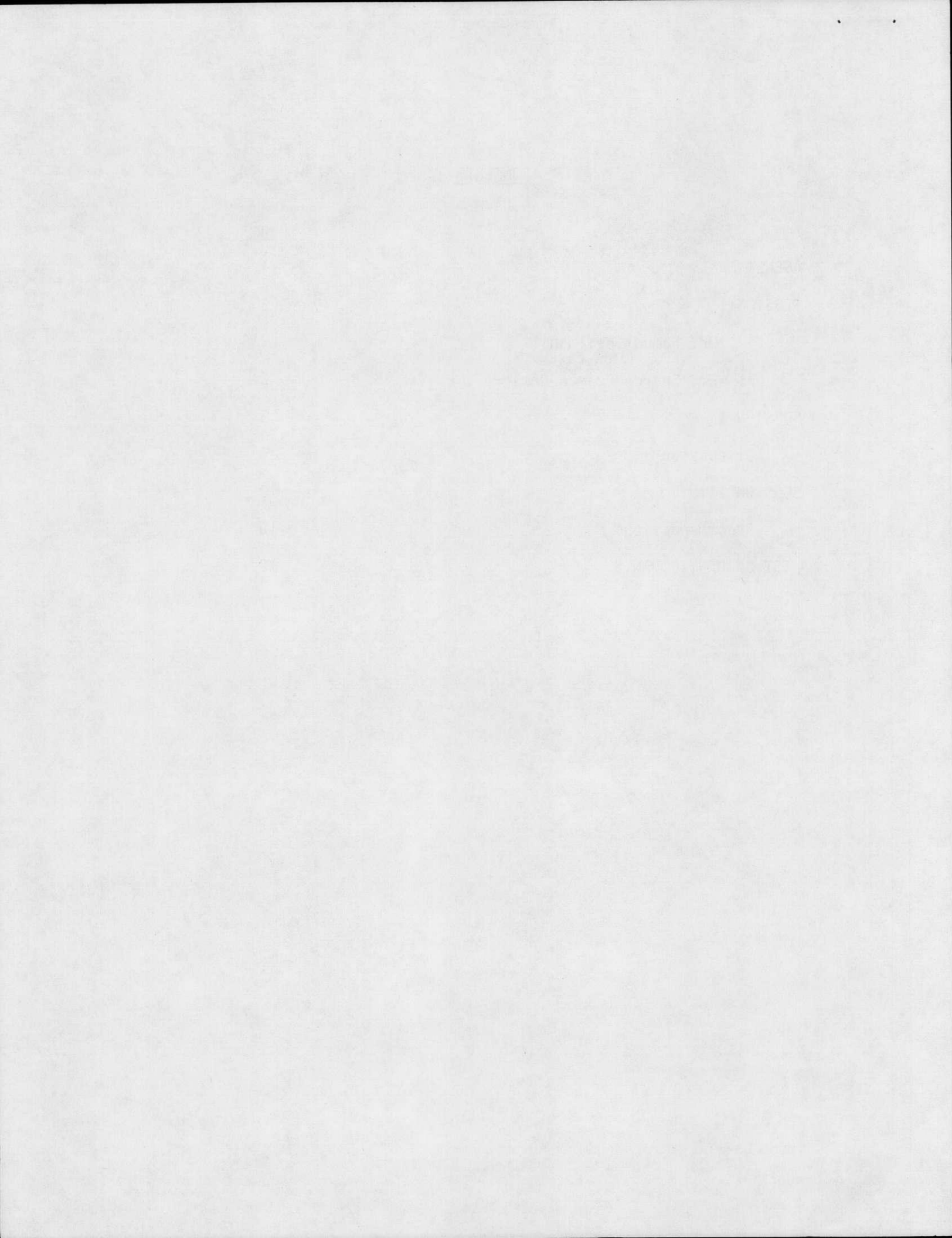
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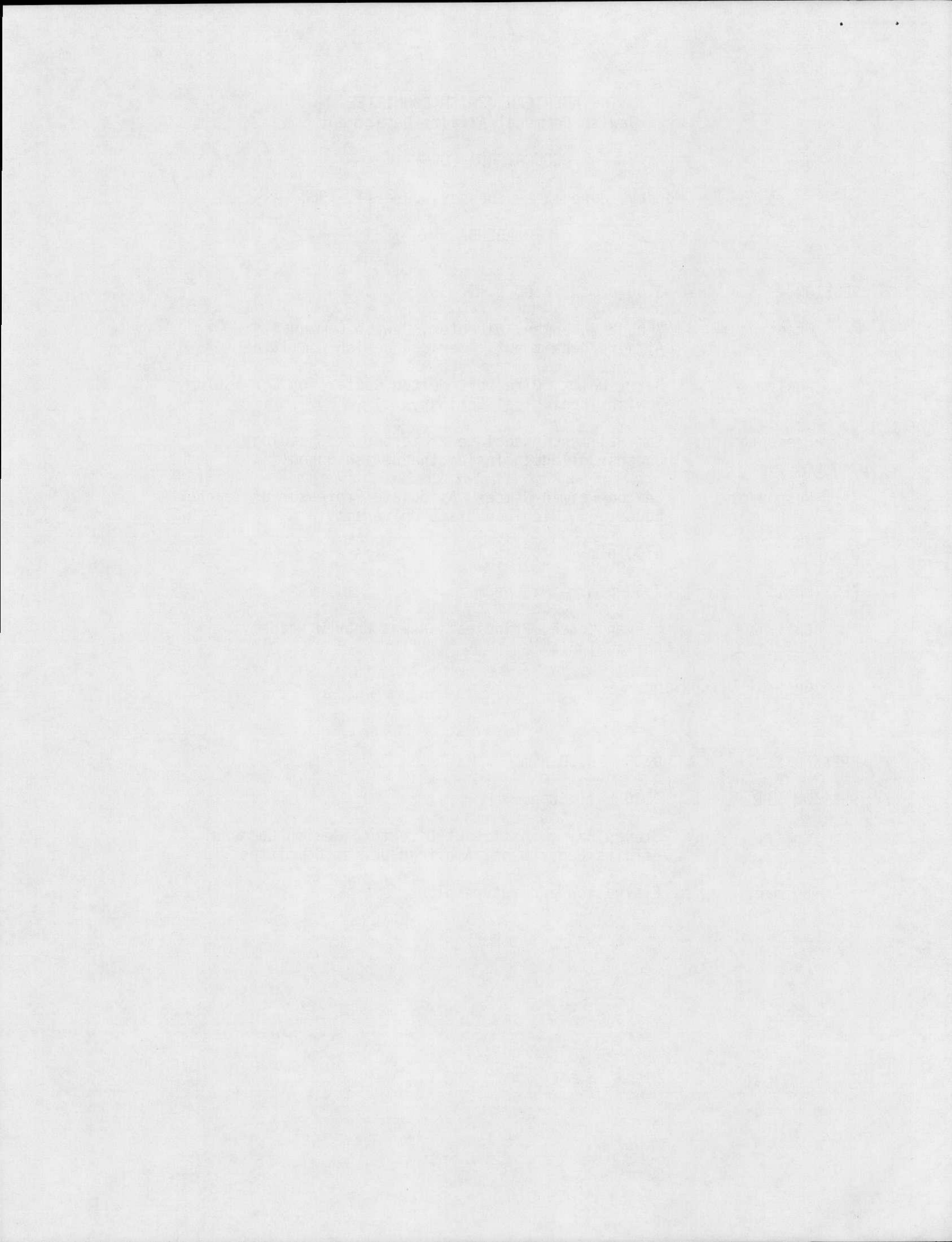
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
Jewish Communal Affairs Department

EDUCATORS' FORUM

Monday, June 13 -- Tuesday, June 14, 1983

AGENDA

- SESSION I 3:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
- Greetings: Yehuda Rosenman, Director, Jewish Communal
Affairs Department, American Jewish Committee
- Chair: Barry Holtz, Director, Melton Center for Curriculum,
Jewish Theological Seminary
- Presentation: Sam Heilman, Associate Professor of Sociology,
Queens College, "Inside the Jewish School"
- Response: Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Associate Professor of Teacher
Education, Michigan State University
- DINNER 6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.
- SESSION II 7:30 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.
- Chair: Steven Lorch, Principal, Akiba Hebrew Academy,
Philadelphia
- General Discussion
- BREAKFAST: 9:00 - 9:30 a.m.
- SESSION III 9:30 - 11:30 a.m.
- Chair: Steven Bayme, Assistant Director, Jewish Communal
Affairs Department, American Jewish Committee
- Summary: Evaluation and future plans



The American Jewish Committee

JEWISH EDUCATORS' FORUM

Summary Proceedings

SESSION I

Chairperson: Dr. Barry Holtz

Yehuda Rosenman, Director, Jewish Communal Affairs Department, American Jewish Committee, opened the Forum by greeting the participants and asking them to introduce themselves. In reviewing AJC's long-standing commitment to Jewish education, Mr. Rosenman singled out the three-year Colloquium on Jewish Education and Jewish Identity convened by AJC from 1972 to 1975. The papers and proceedings were published and widely circulated. More recently, in February, 1982, the AJC sponsored a consultation on Jewish education and Jewish identity at which Drs. Walter Ackerman and Samuel Heilman presented an update of developments in the field during the past ten years. The Proceedings of that consultation were published and circulated in advance to participants in the Educators' Forum.

Among the recommendations made at the February 1982 Consultation was the creation of a high-level "think tank" for Jewish education. Such a "think tank" would provide an academic atmosphere in which the best thinking and research on major issues and questions related to Jewish education could be dealt with. There was general agreement with the desirability of implementing the idea and it was felt that the Committee, by virtue of its neutral position vis a vis Jewish education, was the ideal sponsor.

With this in mind, the American Jewish Committee invited a select group of Jewish scholars, researchers in general education, and front-line practitioners in the field to the Educators' Forum. A number of participants were also involved in planning the Forum. In closing, Mr. Rosenman thanked Dr. Steven Bayme, Assistant Director, JCAD, for his work in coordinating the Forum and bringing it to fruition.

After these introductory comments, Mr. Rosenman called on Dr. Barry Holtz, co-director, Melton Research Center, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, to chair the opening session.

Dr. Holtz introduced the first speaker, Dr. Samuel Heilman, Professor of Sociology at Queens College. Dr. Heilman reported on the results of the ethnographic study he had conducted for AJC of an Orthodox day school, a Conservative afternoon school and a Reform supplementary school. Dr. Heilman's study, "Inside the Jewish School," will be published in its entirety and sent to all participants. Highlights of his report are presented here.

Dr. Samuel Heilman

Dr. Heilman began by noting that his primary emphasis had been on the social environment and the culture of the Jewish school. He was concerned primarily with understanding the impact of the curricular materials upon the students in terms of their basic social consciousness and orientations. Among Dr. Heilman's findings, based on 100 hours of field work, are the following:

1. A sense of attachment and commitment to Jewish tradition is often a prerequisite for effectively mastering the subject matter.
2. Cultural dissonance--tension between the students' values and those of the teachers or between the students' orientations and the nature of the subject matter impedes effective learning and often causes "flooding out," a tendency to break totally away from the primary direction of the lesson into an entirely different area or topic. "Flooding out" increases as the tension level within a particular class increases. Those who are most ambivalent about their Jewishness or alienated from Jewish matters are most likely to "flood out."
3. Jewish schools often strive to create a "homey" atmosphere in which students are happy to attend and express fondness for their surroundings. In this sense schools do succeed in communicating a sense of Jewish community and the importance of affiliating with other Jews. Students claim to "like Hebrew school" even if they are not interested in what goes on there.
4. "Flooding out" can result in effective learning if the teacher utilizes the digressions to create greater intimacy among the members of the group and manages to plant Jewish teachings within the digression.
5. Learning is enhanced if the educator understands and shares the values of the community he/she serves. Thus, for example, modern Orthodox day schools ought to recruit religious and secular instructors who share a modern Orthodox perspective and value system.
6. Contrary to popular opinion, the Jewish school does work. It reflects the community it serves and prepares the student to join that community. It mirrors all of the ambivalence and cultural dissonance concerning the Jewish identity of that community. This can be changed only by greater parental involvement in their children's education. Alternatively, if the community cannot be changed we should consider reshaping the school community in a Jewish boarding school or prep school setting.

Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser

Following Dr. Heilman's presentation, Dr. Holtz called on Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Associate Professor of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, to respond to Dr. Heilman's paper.

Dr. Feiman-Nemser praised Dr. Heilman's ethnographic approach to Jewish education for its emphasis on patterns of interaction between students, teachers, and home life. Indeed, we need to understand "what is going on here" in order to recommend remedies and to demonstrate what is working and what is not. However, Dr. Feiman-Nemser disagreed with some of Dr. Heilman's reading of the evidence. Some of the classroom vignettes he presented indicated poor teaching methods rather than cultural dissonance. A clearer purpose and a more engaging method on the part of the teacher might have prevented the "flooding out." Teachers must not only cover the material, but must also "uncover it"--making it accessible and meaningful

to students. In these vignettes the students remain bored. It is not enough for students to feel at home in school; they must be engaged in cognitive and interesting learning. It is important that students feel good about being with fellow Jews, but this is insufficient. If it is true, as Heilman indicates, that the school has replaced the home, then we must explore ways to integrate home and school.

SESSION II

Chairperson: Dr. Steven Lorch

Dr. Steven Lorch, Principal, Akiba Hebrew Academy of Philadelphia, opened the session with a brief summary of the afternoon's presentations which dealt with ethnography and how it fits into traditional research. The discussion focused on the school climate and school effectiveness as revealed by the application of new techniques and tools. The goal of the Forum is to discover what factors, if put in place, would enhance the effectiveness and quality of the education of students.

To give direction to the evening's proceedings, Dr. Lorch then listed his impression of the issues raised by the papers presented by Drs. Samuel Heilman and Sharon Feiman-Nemser.

1. What are the available models for Jewish education? Public education, progressive education, the Jewish home, other forms of Jewish education.
2. What are the goals of Jewish education? Knowledge, skills, attitudes. In determining priorities, we have to decide whether some are more important than others, whether some are prerequisites for others, or whether they may be in conflict with others. In dealing with the tension among goals, we must determine which are more or less appropriate for Jewish schools.
3. In assessing effectiveness, we must decide whether the ultimate effect of education should be enculturation, i.e. preservation of the status quo, or serving as a change agent.
4. The means of assessing education and determining whether learning environments are effective. Two opposing specific issues raised were:
 - A. "Flooding out" as opposed to artful teaching.
 - B. Cultural tension in Jewish education versus a correspondence of values between teacher and community or the capacity of the teacher to make a leap so that values will be consonant with those of the community.

After listing the issues, Dr. Lorch posed the following questions to the practitioners in the group:

1. Do the researchers' data and analysis jibe with practitioners' experience in Jewish schools?
2. Do the techniques and findings suggest new approaches for strengthening schools through changing old methods and approaches?
3. How can any of this serve to influence our practice and what is the information which might be disseminated to other schools?

Discussion

In reply to Dr. Rosen's question, Dr. Heilman opening his response to Dr. Feiman-Nemser's comments by defining "flooding out" as "being out of play," doing something which breaks the scheme of events with disruption thereby breaking the train of involvement. He went on to address specific statements made by Sharon Feiman-Nemser.

The difference of opinion seems to be based on whether the problems of the Jewish schools are due to cultural tension or "flooding out" due to bad teaching. It is true that a good teacher can handle "flooding out," and it may be that cases mentioned zeroed in on bad teaching. Nevertheless, there are certain elements of the Jewish school experience in which students simply cannot become engaged, because the world from which they come and the world into which they are thrown are so far apart. Students, therefore, will use any means to get out of the situation. They cannot physically leave and they therefore choose to be alienated from the teaching while remaining in the school setting. As to the students' boredom mentioned by Feiman-Nemser, it may be the result of bad teaching, but it is also an outcome of cultural distance. Even the best teacher cannot succeed if the children are not touched. At the same time, a master teacher can make children respond even to routine materials. It is not a matter of either/or.

There were several responses to the question of the extent to which Dr. Heilman's study matches the experiences of practitioners. Joel Gordon stated that "flooding out" was a frequent phenomenon in his school. He handled it by using it as a means of reengaging the class in study. Because of the tremendous gap between where children come from and what is being taught, he is troubled by whether what he teaches, even at its most successful, will have any impact on bridging the chasm.

To help students relate to what they are learning, Jay Braverman suggested sensitizing teachers to the fact that concepts which they take for granted, such as "Torah Lishma" are entirely strange to their students. He also felt that students need a more familiar frame of reference, and idealizing our forefathers and mothers creates an unreachable goal. In response to the considerable interest in how students assess their Jewish education as compared to other aspects of the heavy learning schedule in Canadian schools, Braverman set up a Jewish family life education program for the tenth grade. It was a direct effort to bridge the gap between the real world and the world of Jewish studies, to try to see what it means to parent Jewishly. He questioned several classes as to the effect and relevance of Jewish studies to their lives and got opposite responses. Science majors, the more gifted group, failed to see any relevance while liberal arts majors said it had relevance. He found the results frightening and astounding.

Sam Schaffler was not sure of the difference between "flooding out" or the "tuning out" which was part of his own educational experience, but he regarded the latter as a way of survival. Cultural dissonance made it a necessity and the residue of guilt it produced was valuable in itself.

He felt that ethnography, while valuable as a research technique, offers the equivalent of a one time polaroid snapshot. What is needed is a continuing reel of film for which an ongoing study of one setting over several years might be more productive.

As to the issue of dissonance, Schaffler pointed out that it has a positive value. Education is not always the result of congruity between the settings of family and the educational institution. The success story of the Jewish camp is a case in point. The camp is a cultural island from which the parents are excluded. Such cultural isolation, however, is not an exclusive function of spatial distance. The Zionist youth group which shaped his life was geographically near, but ideologically distant from the world in which he lived. Schaffler suggested that cultural dissonance could be used in the classroom to stimulate the students. Thus, teachers need not necessarily come from the same background as their students.

Josh Elkin commented that he regards ethnography as an important research technique for Jewish education, and feels that much more of it should be done. It is important to know what really happens in the classroom and the concept of the hidden curriculum is an important one.

The data in both reports seems accurate but on the basis of his own experience, Elkin tended to place greater importance on the effective teacher as the prime factor in keeping children to task. He nevertheless urged further ethnographic research to explore the entire social fabric in which learning takes place--the home, the synagogue and institutions other than the classroom. This would help to document needs and arrive at programmatic solutions.

Bernard Reisman noted that the two reports, Sam Heilman's analysis of the dynamics of Jewish education, and Sharon Feiman-Nemser's comments on the consequences of his observations for classroom procedures were mutually illuminating. However, we should broaden our concept of dissonance to include the variety of tensions under which students learn. When we consider all the possibilities, he agrees with Feiman-Nemser's emphasis on the need for professionally trained teachers. However, given the realities of Hebrew school teaching, finding sensitive and attentive teachers is not an immediate solution. Another issue brought up by Reisman and not dealt with by the speakers was the need to return to basics and re-emphasize textual study.

Barry Holtz tended to agree with the suggestions presented by Feiman-Nemser because of the factor of control. While we have little control over the ethnographic aspects of Jewish education studied by Heilman, we can have an impact on teacher training. Good teachers can handle "flooding out" and control a class, but the power of outside culture tends to make Jewishness appear odd. He quoted Leonard Fein's article which pointed out "that we are engaged in an enterprise that is absurd and so much against the grain of American culture that we are developing a self-destruct apparatus." The question which must be addressed is, "Given the nature of Judaism, how do we combat the flood of outside culture, which is the culture of our students?"

Some comfort was offered by Judith Press who reported the results of her study of 18 children, 8-12, in regard to their attitudes to Jewish life. The students regarded the Jewish school as a legitimate enterprise which they would not leave. Heilman felt that if sending a child to a Hebrew school, whatever its educational level, guaranteed future affiliation, then it is a worthwhile enterprise.

Lou Newman objected to such minimal achievement and focused on the importance of establishing goals for Jewish education in order to arrive at appropriate methods. First, Jewish education must recognize that we are different and in conflict with the world around us, and second, it must serve a meaningful socializing function. Ethnography can serve an important function by holding up a mirror to the educational establishment. The observations in Heilman's study can alert rabbis and

educators and force them to come to grips with reality. Bureaus of Jewish Education must cease to offer "parve" curricula; they should emphasize differences and spell out choices, and clarify what movements stand for. The child knows what is experienced on the outside, but is not exposed to a counter movement. The teacher is unable to offer viable alternatives within the Jewish framework. In the end, success in Jewish education comes back to the quality of the teacher and challenging materials which sharpen the issues.

Stuart Kelman noted that learning theory indicates that "flooding out" and disruption are not only acceptable, but necessary for progression. The real question is how to train teachers to deal with "flooding out" or what a San Diego study called "critical incident intervention." He was also troubled by the appropriate role for research, the feasibility of drawing conclusions from a micro sample and the implications to be drawn from research.

Lorch asked if any thought had been given to adapting to Jewish education the best school effectiveness concept on which the study, Fifteen Thousand Hours, was based. Fifteen Thousand Hours refers to the time spent by students in elementary and secondary schools in England and is the title of the published results of a research project conducted in 1979 by Michael Rutter, a professor of child psychiatry. The study compared two schools in similarly poor London neighborhoods with comparable student bodies. The results indicated that schools are capable of producing radically different educational results even when social and economic factors are constant. The report emphasized the importance of the ethos of successful schools, i.e. the focus on academia concerns discipline and praise and the importance of a fair-share of high ability students.

Harold Himmelfarb questioned the idea that mere attendance at Hebrew school has a positive effect as well as Feiman-Nemser's suggestion of adapting the procedures of progressive education. He stated the need for an interactive model for Jewish schools. Since the school cannot be a model family or community, given the limited time it has, it should recognize what it does best. Schools can extend their influence by channeling students to other reinforcing environments such as camps, youth groups, and family education. It is essential to look at the totality of the educational effort. Toward this end, more research should be done on parental life styles and an effort should be made to document the factors which result in "good schools" and to compare them to schools which are considered poor.

The importance of the study of texts was affirmed by Sam Schaffler who pointed out that the classical tradition believes in the redemptive value of studying texts irrespective of the values brought by the student. He disagreed with Lou Newman's defining dissonance as disagreement. Dissonance is a necessary factor in order to allow for the expression of the varying passions and differing commitments within Judaism.

Commenting on the concept of research, Susan Stodolsky tried to delineate what research can and cannot do. Research tells us what is going on but should not be expected to indicate what ought to be or what we must do to initiate discussion. It is not the basis for policy implications which can be drawn from many sources. She felt that the research world promises too much, often giving an unrealistic view of children and schools, consequently disappointing those who look to research for solutions.

As a non-researcher, Harriet Bogard asked for guidelines toward the identification of good schools and a clarification of goals for various school models. Supplementary afternoon schools promise and deliver certain skills and a successful Bar or Bat Mitzvah performance. Sunday schools are not as clear as to goals or what parents expect.

Addressing the issue of goals, Joel Gordon defined a successful school as one which turns out a high percentage of Jewish students, who grow up to live significantly Jewish lives, for whom Jewish ideas are central and who are motivated to transmit these values to their children and grandchildren.

Sam Heilman responded to this definition of success by noting that it is relative and depends on family and community. For him, a successful school is one which fits the school to the community. "Flooding out" which illustrates the important concept of cultural dissonance, indicates how school and community do or do not fit together. The issue is not simply getting better teachers and curricula; success depends on the nature of the Jewish community. A good teacher who turns out a child who does not fit into the community will be dismissed. Lou Newman maintained that good teachers who make an important impression can make the difference. He urged more effective teacher training and clarification of goals.

Several suggestions were made regarding the recognition of the factors involved in achieving success in Jewish education. Josh Elkin, taking Sam Heilman's concept of congruity between school and community and Lou Newman's stress on good teachers, suggested documentation of such issues as how congruity is arrived at, why some teachers succeed in communities lacking congruence.

Harold Himmelfarb stressed the need for the researchers to devise definitions and parameters, but not to become bogged down in clarifying goals. A loose definition here would suffice. Studies of school effectiveness have shown that we must consider factors previously overlooked such as parents, cultural background, etc.

To Bernard Reisman, the important implications of Heilman's study lie in the concept of dissonance and how it is used. Most youngsters accept the idea of being different as part of the perennial Jewish experience. However, there is more to dissonance than differences in cultural patterns, and it deserves amplification.

To transmit the idea without overloading it negatively, the community must be sure that the child knows that there is more to Jewish education than being different. The dissonance should be balanced by programs which stress the positives of being Jewish, i.e., being part of a supportive group, the special relationships to sensitive adults who care and are responsive to one's needs, the unique connection to peers in the same status, etc. In addition, we must devise ways to direct the creative energy that emerges from the tensions between the outside world and the demands of being Jewish. The learner should identify with the heroes and the heroic experiences of Jewish life and history. A sense of pride and understanding, of being part of an elect situation, should be engendered in order to bring the learner to a transcendental spiritual level which makes him/her want to learn.

SESSION III

Chairperson: Dr. Steven Bayme

Steven Bayme, Assistant Director, JCAD, chaired this session and reviewed the original purpose of the Forum--to provide a high level "think tank" for front-line educators and researchers in Jewish education. After summarizing the proceedings of the first two sessions, Dr. Bayme asked those present to address the question of whether the current group of educators representing diverse interests is a good model for a "think tank" on Jewish education, and whether the AJC is the appropriate organization to sponsor it.

Several participants suggested the inclusion at future sessions of constituencies not represented in the Forum: teachers, lay leaders, experts in supplementary education, Reform educators, Jewish center personnel. It was noted, however, that a larger group might limit open discussion, and that a continuing group could get to know one another better, and function as an ongoing seminar.

There was considerable debate over whether a "think tank" was really what was needed. A number of speakers stated that their participation would be worth while only if the proceedings had direct implications for the classroom and the community. Others responded that the AJC is not the appropriate forum for the discussion of specific practical classroom concerns, and that sessions dealing with broad concepts would inevitably have practical implications as well.

The following suggestions about the format of future forums were expressed. Papers should be circulated in advance, to avoid spending precious time on hearing them read. The Forum should be expanded from a 24-hour period to perhaps 3 days or an entire week. The meeting place might be a retreat center so that participants will remain together throughout the deliberation period. The schedule should include some time for participants to break up into affinity groups which would allow for the discussion of the specific concerns of their respective specialties. Bernard Reisman urged that a spirited discussion of one "charismatic" paper is of more benefit than drawn out procedural discussions. Harold Himmelfarb felt that AJC could make a significant contribution by sponsoring research in Jewish education, which now overwhelmingly takes the form of dissertations.

Recommendations for topics to be covered at future forums include:

1. How to make the various cultural dissonances inherent in Jewish education creative rather than destructive.
2. How to bring the community into the school.
3. Researchers in general education should report on their findings which might have implications for Jewish education.
4. How to create a "profession" of Jewish teaching.
5. Is meaningful supplementary Jewish education feasible?
6. Study a "successful" Jewish school in contrast to an "ordinary" one.

7. What is the "authentic Jew" we wish Jewish education to create?
8. An evaluation of the camp model of Jewish education.
9. How do we develop models or lay leadership in Jewish education?
10. Impact on Jewish education of changes in the Jewish family .
11. Adult Jewish education.
12. The respective roles in Jewish education of socialization and imparting knowledge.

It was suggested that a committee be set up to develop plans for the next forum.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Educators' Forum

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JEWISH EDUCATION THINK TANK

June 10, 1986

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