Shared Power, Risk-Taking, and Innovation:
Participatory Action Research in Jewish Education

By Miriam Raider-Roth, Amy-Rector Aranda, Tammy Kaiser, Liron Lipinsky, Alison Weikel, Sara Wolkenfeld and Liat Zaidenberg.

Introduction—Miriam Raider-Roth & Amy Rector-Aranda

In a large hotel ballroom, 40 Jewish educational leaders milled around, markers in hand, responding to sentence prompts on 30 posters. With Israeli music playing in the background, sounds of chatting and occasional laughter filled the room. This was the scene of a Group-Level Understanding (GLU) process that Cohort 7 of the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute engaged in during our opening seminar in June 2015. Education directors of congregational schools, department heads of Jewish day schools, consultants in Jewish communal and national agencies, and MTEI faculty circled the room with curiosity and energy (see Image 1). What all these participants shared in common was the responsibility for professional development in their settings. Each person was a teacher educator. The goal of the GLU was to create a shared inquiry among the 40 educational leaders and seven faculty in this cohort about the challenges they encounter in their institutions, the highlights of their jobs, and their hopes and expectations for the program. In addition, we wanted to help the participants make visible the assets they each brought to the program and how they might share these strengths and skills with one another and the program. Finally, as a collective inquiry, we created the opportunity for the participants to articulate their learning needs in the program.

Group-Level Understanding

The GLU process was an adaptation of the Group-Level Assessment (GLA) process (Vaughn, 2014; Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014), which focuses on helping a community assess the

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1 MTEI was founded by Gail Dorph in 1995 to address a profound need in Jewish education to improve the quality of student learning. Together with Barry Holtz, Sharon Feiman Nemser, and Deborah Ball, Gail launched the proposition that if we improved the quality of professional development for teachers in Jewish schools, the educational practices, curriculum, and learning would improve as well. As a capacity building program to “train the trainers,” MTEI invited educational leaders who were responsible for professional development or learning in their institutions. Twenty-two years later, a body of research and evaluation demonstrates that MTEI participants profoundly change the nature of the professional development practices in their schools from didactic and mimetic forms of PD to an inquiry-based, teacher-centered, Jewish text-centered, and collaboratively focused model (Dorph, 2011; www.mtei-learning.org).

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state of a particular issue (such as homelessness, substance abuse, suicide prevention, children’s health disparities) and create action steps to address the issue (Graham, Schellinger, Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn, Jacquez, & Lang, 2011). The GLA is a participatory research process in which a group generates data by responding to poster prompts, collectively analyzes the data, selects the themes that speak loudest to them, and then chooses action steps to address the challenges and opportunities they have identified. It is a group investigation or inquiry, seeking to bring all stakeholders to a common space to articulate their questions, concerns, ideas, and resources. In this sense, our adaptation of the GLA process reflects a core dimension of Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (2009) conception of practitioner inquiry communities “as catalysts for teacher learning” (p. 126). The GLA process has seven discrete steps:

Step 1: Climate setting—Facilitator creates a relaxed collegial space and explains the GLA process.

Step 2: Generating—Participants post responses to prompts written on posters.

Step 3: Appreciating—Participants read all the responses to posts in a gallery walk, as well as place a check or star next to those with which they agree.

Step 4: Reflecting—Participants are invited to quietly ponder or write about their personal observations.

Step 5: Understanding—Participants are divided into smaller groups of five to eight and assigned a set of charts. They discuss and look for patterns or themes across the charts, analyzing the data from their perspectives.

Step 6: Selecting—Participants clarify the most important ideas, distilling the themes from Step 5. This can be done as a large group with the primary facilitator, or in self-facilitated small groups.

Step 7: Action—Large group considers possible next steps based on priorities, informing relevant future programs, interventions, developments, or other desired change. The group can choose to then break into smaller groups for specific action planning. (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014)

While the MTEI program has a specific curriculum concerning inquiry-oriented and Jewish text-based professional development for educational leaders (Dorph, 2011), we also value creating a responsive curriculum in which the faculty listen closely to the ideas, questions, and needs of the participants and modify dimensions of the learning accordingly. The MTEI GLU was a variation of the GLA because rather than identifying a “problem” that the group was trying
to solve, we were trying to understand and make visible the issues in their work-lives that were most pressing so that the MTEI curriculum would be responsive to the participants’ actual needs.

Cycles of Inquiry, Reflection, and Action

After climate setting and describing the process, faculty led the participants in the generating phase. In 30 posters, we posed prompts such as:

- The most stressful part of my job is…
- The best way to support me as a Jewish educational leader is…
- The biggest barrier/greatest resource to the success of professional development in my institution is…
- One value that I hope will guide our MTEI work is…
- A skill/talent/resource I would like to share with others is…

After about half an hour of generating, appreciating, and personally reflecting on the responses, small groups of five or six people each huddled around three or four clustered posters, reading them for common themes or shared ideas across the posters (Step 5: Understanding; see Image 2).

Themes such as collaboration, communication, time, money, and relationships emerged in the first round of theme-finding.

While we shared the themes that emerged in the small groups, time did not allow for the group as a whole to select the most prominent or important themes or determine action steps (steps 6 and 7 described above). As a result, cohort members were invited to join an inquiry community—a small group that would meet after the seminar to continue our theme finding and suggest actions to the faculty and cohort. In this way, participants were invited into the curriculum design of the seminars. In addition, as a member of the MTEI leadership team (Miriam) and a doctoral student studying practitioner action research (Amy), we were particularly interested in studying the GLU/GLA process more deeply and investigating its potential as a professional development tool for educational leaders.

Shortly after June 2015, a small group of MTEI participants began to meet on Zoom, an online group conference-style meeting space, to continue the group inquiry. We completed another round of theme finding, this time being more systematic about identifying the major threads in participants’ statements generated at the seminar. The posters had been typed up so that we were able to read the responses easily. We began with the original themes identified by

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the full cohort, and then sorted all of the responses into these categories. We refined the original themes, added others, combined some, and after much discussion, and many meetings, we identified five broad themes that the group felt were most important and stood out in the data: *relationships, communication and conflict, the purposes of professional development, time and money* (a.k.a. *power/politics*), and *Jewish content and texts*. The themes were described by the group as follows:

**Relationships**—The web of relationships that we inhabit is complex, including relationships with parents, teachers, students, rabbis, lay leadership. The health of these relationships has everything to do with our success. Relationships are key motivators.

**Conflict/Communication**—The issue of conflict/adversarial relationships is often hidden or unspoken. Open communication is important and sometimes fraught. Successful conversations have “content” at their core, reflecting a strong I/Thou/It relationship.² Difficult/uncomfortable conversations are often characterized by “telling” language.

**Purposes of PD**—The question of buy-in is central and complicated. We ask ourselves about the purposes and whose interests it serves? [Additionally we need to remember that] we have teachers with varied needs, experiences, and talents.

**Time/Money (aka Power/Politics)**—Captures the question “How do we find the resources to achieve the vision that we have for our schools/institutions?” and includes the observation that “The lack of time was in almost every category.”

**Jewish context/texts**—This was the subtext of ALL the charts and was the key in successful conversations.

After we defined each theme, we created a chart that included each theme/definition, the values that each theme reflected, and the challenges that cohort members wrote on the posters related to that theme. For example, in the *relationships* theme, the group noted that the centrality of relationships in their work reflected the values of “mutuality, reciprocity, honoring everyone’s voice in relationship, flexibility, collaboration, inclusion, community, respect/kavod, kindness.” A related challenge was “Lack of relationship leads to isolation, stress, and feeling overwhelmed.” After this careful and thorough work, we returned to the next seminar (November 2015) with this theme/value/challenge chart and asked the cohort for feedback.

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² This refers to David Hawkins’s model of the teaching-learning relationship, which includes the I, Thou, and It, or the teacher, learner, and subject matter. This model is a core learning theory in MTEI.

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Sitting in small groups, we asked how/if these themes still resonated for them, what were the silences or omissions in the themes, and what curricular actions might be taken to address them during MTEI. As group facilitators, the inquiry community members took careful notes and shared all of our documentation with the faculty.

While gathering these notes and sharing them with the faculty was one concrete action, we also felt it was important that the cohort itself took action that was responsive to the challenges we observed in the data. In consulting with the faculty, we decided to use the Descriptive Consultancy Protocol (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013) as a collective inquiry process that would help the cohort dig more deeply into leadership dilemmas that had emerged in the data. Three members of our inquiry community wrote detailed descriptions of dilemmas that they then presented and discussed in small group processes. For example, picking up on the theme of “buy-in” in the topic of professional development practices, one small group focused on the question “How do I honor a teacher’s voice in our relationship while still advancing the practices of professional development and reflection that are important to me?” The Consultancy protocol offered us a collective inquiry process in which the whole cohort could engage in thinking through some of the prevailing dilemmas that had surfaced during the GLU.

GLU/GLA in Other Jewish Education Settings

After the seminar, our inquiry community continued to meet. We had observed the power of the GLU/GLA in the MTEI cohort and wondered how it could provide a framework for collective inquiry and action in our own settings and communities. As part of the MTEI faculty, we (Amy and Miriam) asked ourselves in what ways a participatory inquiry process could be implemented as a leadership practice. In other words, how might facilitating participatory action research in a day school or congregational school be a useful practice for leaders to initiate and enact positive change? In the following pages, members of our inquiry community recount their responses to this question. We will hear from early childhood school director, Tammy Kaiser, congregational school leaders Liron Lipinsky and Alison Weikel, day school teacher Sara Wolkenfeld, and educational consultant Liat Zaidenbeg. The article then concludes with our thoughts about the possibilities for participatory inquiry in educational leadership and practice.

In the narratives below, the authors describe their research questions, their experiences with this process, the discoveries they made, and actions they took. As we read, reflected on, and analyzed the narratives below, we found that the GLU/GLA process had the potential to democratize the leadership stance and increase buy-in from the many different stakeholders in our institutions. We also found that engaging communities in a participatory research process—one in which data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted together—created new avenues of communication between leaders and faculty, between teachers and students, and between consultants and communities. In a sense, the potential of participatory research as a form of
Jewish educational leadership became evident. Moreover, this form of leadership created important moments of professional learning for both the leaders and the faculties/constituencies with which they worked.

**Respect and Risk—Tammy Kaiser³**

When I first learned about the GLU/GLA through the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute I realized that, while I engage in forms of participatory research with other stakeholders in my community, I had never used a similar approach with my staff. As a school director, I frequently solicit feedback from parents, board members, and even students. I have used surveys, focus groups, various change management approaches, and community-based participatory research models to evaluate my school on everything from the way it “feels” when you enter the doors to the appropriateness of our curricular objectives. Now, I wondered, how do I invite teachers into the process to redesign the way we work as a team so that our school practices better meet their needs?

The 21 staff members at my school, the ECLC, are routinely evaluated with both formal and informal evaluations. These include tools provided through third-party vendors, those developed in-house, and faculty self-assessments. These methods have been relatively successful in providing the data I need in order to make decisions such as contract renewal, increases in compensation, and teaching placement. Meeting with teachers one-on-one is an important tool for evaluation as well as relationship building, but it did not capture the wealth of knowledge of the faculty as a group. When I learned about GLU/GLA, I hoped I had found a tool that would enable me to build a more participatory mode of assessment.

I began to think of how to best approach GLU/GLA with my staff. What did I really want to accomplish? What did I want to learn during this process that I couldn’t learn using other tools? What questions did I really want to know the answers to? Because I hoped for concrete action steps that the faculty and I would take, I understood that this process now included the action dimensions of GLA, rather than only focusing on shared understanding. I engaged in the prompt-writing with my assistant. We brainstormed together, basing much of our prompt-writing decisions on prior faculty evaluations and self-assessments. We edited the prompts to make them as inclusive and open as possible. Some of the prompts we developed were: *The most Jewish things about the ECLC are... One thing you would change about the ECLC is... and One Early Childhood Education topic you would like to learn about for professional development is...*

The GLA was planned for our upcoming staff meeting. Prior to the meeting, I invited the faculty to the GLA experience, explaining that they would be active contributors in a

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³ Tammy Kaiser is the Director of the Early Childhood Learning Center (ECLC) at Temple Beit HaYam in Stuart, Florida.
participatory process that would help shape their professional learning and the school as a whole. On the evening of the GLA, as my faculty walked among posters, responding to the prompts, I learned more than I had in all of my previous staff meetings. I read the comments they generated and noticed those they appreciated by writing asterisks or check marks on the words their colleagues had written. I watched their body language and how they interacted, conversing with one another, holding eye contact, nodding their heads, and laughing at shared experiences. When we came together to select the ideas upon which we wanted to take action, I saw something I had not seen before. I saw a *team* of professional leaders. I saw a group of individuals who had common goals and were working toward those goals. They had moved among the posters as a group and related with the posters as well as each other as they shared their opinions and visions.

After engaging in the theme finding and selecting steps of the GLA, we identified five areas that we wanted to explore and strengthen as a staff: *afterschool care, Judaics study, pay/class sizes, professional development, and staff satisfaction*. We formed voluntary action groups to address these areas. In contrast to time spent in faculty meetings for which teachers are compensated, the teachers were not paid for their time in the action groups. The incentive was that their voices were heard and that they played a vital role in the future direction of our school, one where the practices of our school reflected the needs of its teachers.

In the weeks following the process, I noticed a change in staff behavior. Not only were they working in their action groups (determined during the process), they were also treating each other with added respect and increased professionalism. Even small changes like greeting each other with a smile in the morning or asking to borrow a supply rather than just taking it did not go unnoticed. Treating the staff as professionals and offering them a voice helped them live up to their potential. By setting the stage with a shared culture of respect, we had already taken an important step along our professional development journey.

I did not know it then, but I was taking a risk by engaging my teachers in this process. I was sending them out into the community to gather information relating to their pay, student population, curriculum, and more. Not only were they engaging as researchers, they were asked to report their findings—to come to me with their ideas and visions. There were times when I disagreed with a suggestion or denied a request. One example reflects this risk-taking. The *pay/class size* action group consisted of four teachers who engaged in a small demographic study of their own creation. They met with local schools and interviewed directors and teachers to find out other schools’ class sizes, teacher compensation, and benefits such as sick and personal days, healthcare, childcare, and membership discounts. I was impressed by the serious and professional approach they took in forming the interview questions, scheduling meetings, and reporting back their findings. In the end, their research led to increases in pay in our school. Yet, one of the teachers in the *pay/class size* action group discovered that the pay was much higher at a Temple in the next town over and left us to work there. I did not anticipate this outcome.

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In the end, however, the risk was worth it. We collected valuable data, and based on the learning and feedback from the groups, I re-envisioned my staff incentives/benefits, hired a Learning Specialist, and developed a brand new after-school program, creating an additional revenue stream for my school. We are moving ahead with more teachers involved in action groups, additional directors involved in a community-wide GLA process, and the voices of all stakeholders are now heard at the table.

The GLA process has changed our school, and community, for the better. After learning about the GLA in which my staff participated, the Commision for Jewish Education of the Jewish Federation of the Greater Palm Beaches invited me to lead a GLA process at their annual Religious School Director’s Retreat. This GLA also resulted in the outcome of multiple action groups and a better understanding of community goals.

Participating in the Group-Level Assessment approach allowed me a greater understanding of the value of participatory research. The process made the needs, challenges, and assets of my staff visible to the group. The GLA also allowed us to create change and redesign the way we work as a team in direct response to the needs of those who teach our littlest learners.

From Identifying to Building Capacity—Liron Lipinsky

I participated in the small group from MTEI that analyzed our GLU data. As educators, we are taught to look for patterns in student data so that we can review or re-teach materials as needed. As we embarked on the theme-finding expedition, we decided to do just that—look for patterns. One prompt after another, a distinct pattern emerged surrounding the theme “capacity.” From “If I could design an App for my school” to “In my institution we should keep doing...” Jewish professionals from various geographic locations, professional positions, and years in the field all questioned their own capacity with regards to time, money, ability, organizational change, and so on. My MTEI cohort was made up of people who were incredibly successful and respected within their communities, and so I was certain that they had never questioned their own capacity out loud, as I had never questioned mine. And yet, there it was—our uncertainty around our role as effective agents of change. This filled me with wonder and curiosity about the following questions: 1) Does everyone at my organization feel this way as well? 2) If we are all unsure of our capacity, how can we actually move forward productively in the work we do? 3)

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Liron Lipinsky is the Founding Director of Joint-Jewish Education Program (J-JEP), a collaborative effort of Congregation Beth Shalom (Conservative) and Rodef Shalom Congregation (Reform) of Pittsburgh. J-JEP is an innovative, experiential, multidenominational Jewish complementary school for students in kindergarten through seventh grade.

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What is the root cause of our capacity issues? And 4) How can I help build capacity in the communities I serve? The fourth question was a puzzle I was interested in investigating.

In my role as the founding Director of the Joint-Jewish Education Program, I serve two congregations whose children both feed into one complementary school. The two congregational communities are quite different—denominationally, financially, culturally. I decided to try the GLU process with three groups initially: the educators from the program I direct and the congregational staff from each of the two communities, separately. Each group had approximately twenty participants. All sessions took place at their respective, pre-scheduled staff meetings and participants received the same directions: write the first thing that comes to your mind. The prompts on the posters did not name the institutions and were not role-specific in order to keep them identical for all three groups. I wanted to study the emerging patterns more uniformly. The prompts were similar to the original ones used with the MTEI participants, such as the following: My greatest accomplishment of 2015 was... When staff works together... Most stressful part of my job... At our organization, what is “under the rug” (not talked about)?... The thing that keeps me up at night... My key collaborations are... The most challenging issue... My favorite part of my job...

After concluding the GLUs with the two congregational staffs, I was left to analyze and theme-find on my own. As I grouped responses from each prompt, I saw my congregational colleagues questioning their capacity with regard to time, money, ability, and responsibility. I shared the themes I found with my partners at the congregations, the other senior staff. However, the information felt like it was simply floating there without direction and the process was incomplete, lacking the final step—a call for action. As an educational leader I came to understand that the participatory action step was necessary. I came to realize that in order to have collective change I needed to have a collective process and include others.

Therefore, when I approached this process for a third time with the educators of the Joint-Jewish Education Program (J-JEP), I decided to follow the prescribed seven-step GLA process as written (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014), having my educators fully participate through action steps. At a staff meeting before our winter break, I asked the entire group of educators to respond to the prompts, review the responses, and analyze for themes and values all together on the same afternoon. The educators also questioned their own capacities, but specifically around the topics of parent engagement and community building. As a group we talked about the two topics and the values each hold for us. We asked questions and named the challenges we were facing: How much should we involve parents in our weekly activities? Who is this program for anyway—the parents or the students? How do we have our students share their learning with each other and build community at the same time?

That afternoon we, collectively, restructured our Sunday morning while keeping the program’s mission and values at the forefront. Our charge is to make every minute count for our...
student participants. We chose to tackle youth prayer, specifically, by focusing on the environment our students were experiencing, and creating an inclusive and intentional prayer community. The opportunity to reimagine this new 30-minute worship filled the room with creative collaborative energy. While there was a slight sense of initial hesitation, as risk-taking often involves, we all agreed to “try on” this plan for five weeks and then regroup to check on our progress.

Whereas the GLA process emphasized the issues surrounding the theme of capacity, it was also instrumental in building the capacity of the J-JEP staff, and a game-changer for the program’s educators. The staff verbalized their sense of ownership for the program. In one afternoon they transformed into a cohesive unit of problem solvers, risk takers, stakeholders, and decision makers.

**Co-Constructing Professional Learning and School Policy—Alison Weikel**

From the first time I encountered the GLU process, I saw it as a tool for co-constructing a shared learning experience. As a congregational school director, I wanted to bring this opportunity to my community. Asking teachers to share their ideas, hopes, strengths, questions, and concerns can challenge the hierarchical structure of a congregational school. Through its emphasis on collective action, the process allows space for teachers to make decisions about their own professional learning as well as provides an opportunity for their voices to contribute to broader school decisions involving policies and curricula.

We launched the opening faculty meeting with a GLU in the 2016–17 school year in our suburban, Midwest Reform congregation. I was particularly interested in showing the teachers that I value their voices, talents, and concerns, and that I hoped to build a collaborative learning community in our faculty meetings. Some of the prompts I chose were: *One value I HOPE will guide our work together as a faculty this year is... In Religious School, we should keep doing, stop doing, start doing... One thing I want to learn this year... A classroom management tip I would like to share is... One resource I wish I had... Something I am most proud of from my last teaching experience...and The most challenging issue I faced in my last teaching experience...*

During the appreciating phase, when I looked closely at the teachers’ responses, the poster with the prompt, “One thing we should STOP doing in Religious School” stood out to me. Three teachers answered “progress reports.” Since specialists do not write progress reports, this represented half of the teachers who do and I wondered about the thinking behind these statements of opposition. Why did some teachers think we should stop writing and sharing progress reports? I decided to bring this topic back to our weekly faculty meetings for the

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5 Alison Weikel was the Director of Education at The Valley Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio and will soon be the Director of Education at Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland, Massachusetts.

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reflecting phase. I realized that this could lead to a policy change, but I was willing to take the risk. I felt strongly that including the teachers’ voices in decisions for our school was an important value.

At the next faculty meeting, we spent time discussing the pros and cons of progress reports in our setting, which generally include four paragraphs—one about the content/curriculum, a second about the activities/experiences for engaging with that content, a third paragraph about the individual child, and a final paragraph about next semester. One of the three teachers who thought we should stop writing progress reports had recently come from another congregational school that used a traditional checklist format. He had expected to find the same format in our school, which is why he had responded the way he did. In this case, the GLU had surfaced his assumption.

One phrase that came up when we were discussing the purposes of progress reports was “evidence of learning.” What does evidence of learning look like in our school and how can we communicate it to parents? I shared conversations I had had with current and former parents serving on the Religious School Committee about progress reports. This group emphasized how much they appreciate and look forward to these reports, which are often the only written communication they receive from teachers about their students. The GLU process helped surface the need to examine how much and in what ways we were communicating with parents about students and deepened our inquiry.

In the next faculty meeting, I asked: “What would you consider to be ‘evidence of learning’ in your classroom?” Teachers wrote individually and then we discussed what they had written at the following week’s meeting. We also studied a Talmud text I had learned at MTEI (Bava Metzia 85B) in which we learn that Rabbi Hiyya went from town to town teaching five children the five books of Torah and six children the six orders of the Mishnah. During this faculty text study, we wondered and discussed what might be the evidence that any learning had occurred as a result of Rabbi Hiyya’s teaching.

After devoting five of our weekly 25–minute meetings to the reflecting and understanding phases of the GLU cycle, it seemed that we had moved beyond coming to a group understanding. Our GLU process had changed to a GLA process because we decided we wanted to take concrete action. We looked at our discussion notes and reflections regarding progress reports. We recognized how progress reports help us assess the work we have done with our students and plan where to go next. We noted the thought that goes into describing student growth and how this can help us appreciate students’ strengths and accomplishments. We considered the parents’ voices saying how the communication is important to them. With all of this in mind, we decided to continue our current progress report practice.
The generative and democratic nature of the GLU/GLA process had uncovered some teachers’ concerns about the progress reports. This surprised me, since no one had ever voiced any criticisms of the practice before. The GLU/GLA process offered an opportunity for a shared-power dynamic in planning content for our faculty meetings in that the discussions we had and the questions we asked each week led to the next week’s meeting. We spent five weekly meetings examining what learning looked like in our classrooms and how we might share evidence of that learning with the students’ parents. The GLU/GLA process enabled us to surface issues that mattered to the teachers, which then became the focus of our joint work in faculty meetings.

The teachers understood that I was open to changing the format or the entire practice of sending progress reports which freed us to explore what progress reports mean and why we engage in this practice. This deep look into evidence of learning helped teachers plan their lessons with outcomes in mind as well as take a broader look at their students’ learning in a whole semester. I saw increased effort and engagement from some teachers in their first semester reports. One longtime teacher was able to describe her students’ learning in much more detail as compared to her reports from the previous year.

[Student] is a natural learner. He gets excited about everything we do. He is a pleasure to have in class. (1st grade progress report, second semester 2015-16 school year)

From the day [student] walked into class on the first day, she demonstrated she would have some pretty amazing talents to share with the class. [Student] has great ideas and truly understands the concepts we have learned in class. For example, when we share the mitzvot we do during the week in our opening circle, after deep insightful thought, she is able to share something that goes well beyond the basic idea that a mitzvah is something such as donating money. [Student] gets excited about all of the activities we do. She handles challenging situations, like the time her beads disappeared, with such maturity, it’s easy to forget she’s only in first grade. [Student] is an asset to the class and her knowledge and her ability to see things so positively really add to the vibrancy of our group. (1st grade progress report, first semester 2016-17 school year)

Asking for faculty voices when planning professional development and in making policy decisions can be risky. As an educational leader, I had to be willing to go in the direction this inquiry took us. The GLU/GLA we used as a tool to kick off our school year proved to be valuable for uncovering assumptions and areas for growth, sharing power, co-constructing learning, and taking action together in our school.

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Empowering High School Students—Sara Wolkenfeld

When I became an educator, I was certain of only one aspect of my career trajectory: I did not want to teach high school. High school students, I felt, were essentially a captive audience, trapped in classes where curricula, policies, and schedules were determined by adults, while the adolescents did their best to fight for control. I did not want to be an “enforcer” in such an environment. When I ultimately decided to take the plunge because of my love for teaching Talmud, I was determined to incorporate student input and let them share in shaping our class. This, of course, is easier said than done. There is a reason why adolescents do not run schools, and their feedback is not always instructive in making decisions that will be beneficial for the class as a whole and conducive to learning the material.

As a participant in MTEI, I experienced the GLU/GLA and developed an appreciation for the richness of the processes. Everyone has the opportunity to provide input as an individual, and then people come together as a group to find the themes and consider the group’s priorities. I realized that using a variation of this process could allow me to build a multi-dimensional picture of the students’ experiences in my class and examine that experience from multiple angles. Most importantly, inviting my students to engage in theme-finding and giving them the opportunity to synthesize and present their reflections to the group would be empowering and allow for transparency. Like so many adolescents, my students often complained about various aspects of school, and there was often a sense of cynicism in their comments; they recognized flaws in the many systems they were a part of, but seemed to feel largely powerless to change them. I wanted to give them the opportunity to impact at least one aspect of their schooling in a real way. My Talmud class is optional for students, and I set out to discover what the choice to opt in looked like from their perspective. What did they hope to gain, and what did they feel they had accomplished?

I decided that GLA would be our activity on the last day of the school year. In the past, I sent out an end-of-year survey, which felt like a very flat and closed process by comparison. Instead, the GLA process was participatory, open, and engaging. At the same time, it felt risky—honest feedback from each student, publicly available for all the other students to see, could lead to conversations that were difficult or embarrassing for me, and the results might not take the class in the direction I personally wanted to pursue. The prompts I offered were designed to invite them to think about the course as a whole, in ways that were both serious and more light-hearted. These included prompts such as: One thing I learned/skill I gained in this class is... One thing I wish I had learned in this class is... and If we made a class shirt, it would say... I asked

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6 Sara Wolkenfeld is the Director of Education at Sefaria, a database and new interface for Jewish texts.
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the students to share their favorite and least favorite parts of the curriculum, as well as any questions they were left with now that the year was ending.

The students were enthusiastic about the GLA. Though some were initially concerned about being identified by their handwriting, they gradually opened up. They were encouraged when they saw that their own comments were similar to others’ comments and intrigued when they were different. After responding to all the prompts, students worked on theme-finding in pairs, and then presented to the class. Each pair wrote a few sentences summarizing their findings, occasionally adding details about whether or not the opinions they saw were very diverse or uniform. Often, we paused to discuss or allow students to express some of the details behind a group’s presentation. For example, one theme was a dislike of homework. The students who investigated this theme found two strands of thought: students generally disliked having to work on Talmud outside of class, but in addition, the content of the homework, which was material designed to supplement our in-class curriculum, felt irrelevant and extraneous to most of the participants. Another theme that took some unpacking emerged from the responses to their favorite unit in the class. Though there was no clear winner in this category, it became evident when we examined the cluster of responses that the longer we spent on the text, the more likely the students were to rank it as among their favorites. They concluded that although some determined their favorite based on what was most interesting, the factors that most strongly influenced whether they “liked” a unit of study was how invested they felt in the material, and the level of mastery they felt when we concluded.

For the students, this process was a chance to reflect on what they had gained over the course of the year, how they had grown and changed, and where there were missed opportunities. High school students complain about all sorts of things, and on a day-to-day basis I hadn’t always appreciated these complaints and their thinking behind them. Working through their feedback together allowed for a sense of collaboration and a feeling of mutual respect. As their teacher, I gained a great deal of insight into what worked and what did not. I heard not only their honest responses, but their thoughtful reflections on the responses of the class as a whole. For example, I learned that one part of the curriculum was unnecessary, and so I went back to my goals and rethought this piece. I wanted the students to have broad exposure to Talmud, beyond the material we covered in-depth, but how else could I attain this goal? This year, I eliminated this element and simply spent more class time on sections of the Talmud beyond the tractate we were primarily studying. My homework is now tied more closely to the work in class, and though the students still don’t love having homework, I suspect that they will evaluate it more positively than last year’s students. Even more importantly, the GLA process taught me that some of my strategies for fostering independent learning were not effective. The students felt that I “never” answered their questions, and that some of the moves that I believed helped them think for themselves just left them confused. I thought I had been respecting the diversity of opinions in the school and in the class by not voicing my own thoughts. This year, I am more
forthcoming in addressing questions as they come up, and more aware of the questions they ask me. I am still careful about not expressing opinions that might be offensive to some of the students, but the GLA process helped me to be more sensitive to those who might become frustrated by my holding back.

Most of all, I learned that the GLA process provided a format for my students and me to reflect together without simply allowing the students to create a list of complaints and requests. The process of gathering their thoughts, finding themes, and articulating and discussing those themes allowed the student both to express themselves and to hear one another. Each individual had a voice in the conversation, and they were able to refine one another’s thoughts during the theme finding process. Though the ensuing conversation was sometimes difficult, it was honest and respectful, as the students recognized the value I placed on their feedback. Listening to the students also gave me a heightened awareness of my own agency in the planning process; accepting their feedback does not mean changing my goals, just rethinking how I achieve them. I can make choices even within the framework that I have set for myself now that I am listening to the students reflecting on my choices. This year, I am using GLU/GLA at both the beginning and the end of the year to give the students a sense of shared ownership in the class from the beginning and to allow myself to benefit from this process of reflection throughout the year.

Modifying the GLA to Meet Community Needs—Liat Zaidenberg

As an educational and leadership coach and consultant, I work with educators and teachers to improve teaching and learning and foster school leadership using various methods based on their specific needs. When I learned about GLU/GLA at MTEI, I recognized a powerful participatory approach to assess and construct understanding and engage in collective planning.

In January 2017, I was asked by the head of a Jewish community school to facilitate a diverse 10-member committee charged with selecting a new staffing model to strengthen the school’s instructional quality and create a more robust and competitive program. The committee was comprised of Jewish studies and general studies teachers, parents, administrators, and the head of the school. They had five staffing model options to examine in order to plan for a new model implementation for the following school year. While it sounded like a relatively simple task, when I met the head of the school, I realized the complexity of this work. The head of the school presented me with a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) for each model based on input from only a few teachers and an administrator who were on the committee. This meant that there was a large information and involvement gap among the members of the committee. Moreover, some members had difficulty separating their roles (as

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7 Liat Zaidenberg is a coach, consultant, and educator who designs and implements professional development, innovative programs, and communities of practice to enhance the quality of education.

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parents, teachers, etc.) in the school from the overall needs of the institution. The fact that we had only three meetings over a one month period to reach an unanimous agreement was another issue that I had to take into consideration. My concerns focused on three main questions: 1. How can I bring all members to a similar level of information and involvement? 2. How can I help the committee members to separate emotions from the task in order to help them take an institutional view? 3. What method/system can I use to reach unanimous agreement in a very tight timeframe?

In response to these concerns, I decided to investigate whether the GLA could offer the committee members a participatory opportunity to come to a consensus. How could the GLA offer every member a voice in a decision-making process and its outcomes? Could this process help each participant to understand the different models and to add their own understandings to the SWOT analysis? I wondered whether the GLA would help the diverse stakeholders see the larger needs of the school and take an institutional view.

Because of the time constraints, I modified the GLA’s seven steps (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). I initiated the generating step prior to the meeting by sending the information about the models and the GLA prompts to everyone via email. They were asked to review each one of the various staffing scenarios, and respond by writing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and questions they had for each model. They emailed me back their input a week prior to the first meeting. I then integrated the responses from the members with the SWOT analysis that the head of school had provided me into one deidentified document.

At the first meeting, after getting to know each other, having a D’var Torah, looking at the committee charge, and setting some norms, I explained the GLA process and what parts we had done so far. I presented the integrated document I had created and asked the members to reflect, add ideas, and ask questions. We also looked for themes across the document in order to create criteria to assess the models. The criteria that emerged included: quality of instruction, teacher attrition and recruiting, student retention, and specialists.

Preparing for the second meeting, I created a document that compared all five models with their SWOT and with the newly created criteria. At the second meeting we analyzed the data presented in the document and looked for more themes. We added additional criteria, such as: advance the goals articulated in the school mission and vision, enrollment boost, ease and seamlessness of implementation, and affordable model. While we tried a number of group processes to help members evaluate the models according to the criteria they had collectively generated, the members had difficulty coming to an agreement.

The qualitative data analysis process was not sufficient for making a consensus decision within the timeframe we had. Consequently, I decided to create a quantitative method that was
Facilitating a diverse group that needs to come to a consensus is never an easy task, especially when the group needs to take actions that will change the way the school operates and that affect the existing faculty. It was important to bring the group to a place where personal egos and emotions were set aside and where hierarchy did not play a role, but rather professionals, volunteers, and administration all had equal voice. I needed to offer each member ways to participate by listening and reading other perspectives, writing and sharing their views, looking at the data from different viewpoints, analyzing the data, and modifying the methods to meet the school’s needs. I knew that using the GLA method could support the process I wanted to lead with the group. However, I could not follow the exact process. I needed to modify the GLA based on the needs of the school, the committee members’ needs, and the circumstances that resulted from the meetings. I had to change the order of the GLA steps, tie the SWOT analysis to the GLA process, and add an additional analytic method to get the committee members to a consensus within the timeframe we had. By enacting certain steps of the process, and committing myself and the group to the essence of the process—the participatory, nonhierarchical, collective stance—we were able to help the school take its next steps with all the stakeholders on board.

Conclusion—Miriam Raider-Roth & Amy Rector-Aranda

We began this article asking how the GLU/GLA participatory action research model could inform our work in MTEI. In walking through the steps of the process in the cohort as a whole, as well as with our inquiry community, we gained important insights into the needs of our cohort. In addition, we saw that the GLU/GLA offered a powerful tool to educational leaders to bring their stakeholders into shared inquiry to improve the quality of the education in their schools. The five educational leaders who shared their experiences in these pages offered us a glimpse into what it takes to learn a new practice, to experiment with educational innovation, and to assume a participatory stance. In addition, they illustrated the ways in which this form of collective inquiry created opportunities for important learning for themselves as well as those with whom they worked.
In reading these accounts as a collection, three key themes emerge. The first is that of power-sharing. In a sense, these educational leaders discovered that in using the GLU/GLA process, they shifted their leadership stance from a “power over” to a “power with” position. In essence, this transition requires a belief that one’s power “grows as it is used to empower others” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p xx). This kind of power thrives in connection with others and is sometimes referred to “relational power” (Surrey, 1987). By positioning themselves in a “power with” position, these leaders created learning opportunities that invited their participants to take full part in decision-making that affected their personal and professional well-being. This invitation conveyed a sense of trust and respect by genuinely honoring their stakeholders’ perspectives and valuing stakeholders’ positionalities as insiders in the classroom/boardroom, and afforded insights that the leaders themselves might not have had. Alison’s, Tammy’s, and Liron’s descriptions of the turning points of the GLU/GLA processes especially portray the magnitude that such power-sharing can have.

The second key theme is that of risk-taking. Tammy’s account communicates just how big the risk can be when a participatory process is offered, and power is shared—a teacher may learn that she can earn more elsewhere and leave her position! Alison similarly took a big risk in inviting her faculty to revisit their progress reports and she was prepared to abandon the status quo. In a sense, we learn from Tammy and Alison that participatory processes can “upset the apple cart” and leaders need to be prepared for this and welcome the possibility of change. And sometimes the participatory process does not have the effect that one hopes for, so it is important to try again, as in Liron’s story. Sara shares the risks that a teacher takes when inviting adolescents into an evaluative process of her course—embarrassment or suggestions that are not in line with a teacher’s own values and needs. And Liat shows how taking a risk by significantly modifying the method ultimately helped her participants reach their goals.

The third theme focuses on innovation with the GLU/GLA methodology itself. Each of the authors here have shared with us ways they played with the process in order to best meet needs specific to their contexts. Their accounts teach us that this participatory method is not a locked process but is one that can be adapted to different demands, such as available time, institutional goals, needs of the leadership, and so forth. Liat describes ways in which she blended the GLA process with a SWOT analysis and a quantitative analytic process to streamline a more participatory approach to her consulting work. One of the places that we really see different approaches is in the collective data analysis phase. Often, time constraints simply do not permit the time-intensive nature of analysis and many successful modifications can be made. At the same time, if possible, we learn just how important this step can be, especially in tandem with the action step. Liron illustrates in her piece that the collective analysis step and the action step were consequential in the success of her third GLA process.
We learned a similar lesson in conducting the GLU/GLA with MTEI. While it was very powerful to have collected the data with the whole cohort, and we learned a great deal from the deep data analysis that the authors of this article conducted on that data set, we lost some of the democratic and transformative possibilities by not completing the process with the whole cohort. Some participants felt left out of the process (even though all were invited to participate), and some did not remember much of the generating phase when we revisited it three months later at our next seminar. At the last seminar when the cohort came to a close two years later, we conducted a GLA asking the participants to reflect on their learning in MTEI and to consider what kinds of ongoing work they would like to do with one another once the program ended. With this purpose in mind, we generated answers to the prompts, sat in small groups to analyze the posters, collectively selected the issues that were most important and feasible to act upon, and then created six action groups. As of the writing of this article, four groups continue to meet, study together, and continue their MTEI learning relationships. Time will tell how the groups continue to evolve. As a program, we are keenly interested to see the power of this collective energy and to galvanize grassroots planning that works in concert with the leadership of the program.

The examples in this article of educational leaders and practitioners using the GLU/GLA participatory research method for a variety of purposes have demonstrated both its suitability and its adaptability for these and possibly other contexts. More than a research method, GLU/GLA shows promise in education settings for magnifying diverse stakeholder voices, sharing power in planning, assessment, and meaning-making tasks, and facilitating innovative—albeit sometimes risky—ways to move groups toward better understanding and meeting their shared goals.

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