

Chapter 2

Self-Regulation Among Students: Sharpening the Questions

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Introduction

The ideas embedded within this chapter emerged during the writing of two articles by Ben-Avie and Comer (2005, 2010) on the intersection between the Yale Child Study Center's School Development Program (SDP) and Jewish education. James P. Comer, M.D., founded SDP in 1968 to turn around low-performing, dysfunctional schools that serve urban, minority youth. Comer, who is African-American, was interested in seeing whether predictors of youth development and student learning were the same for two different groups of youth on opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of socioeconomic status and familial commitment to education: students in urban, minority schools and students in Jewish day schools; this was found to be the case, especially in terms of the importance of relationships (teacher–student, student interpersonal, and home–school). This research set in motion a study of the childhood roots of adult Jewish quality of life, which encompassed Jewish schools, camps, and youth movements. When the opportunity emerged to conduct a 6-year longitudinal outcome evaluation of an urban school district's implementation of the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) initiative, it would have been sufficient to use the evaluation strategies and research instruments that SDP honed in urban schools throughout the country. Instead, the decision was made to draw upon the findings from the childhood roots of Jewish adult quality of life research, which underscored the importance of an internal psychological process—self regulation. Thus, instead of continuing previous research in urban settings in a new urban setting, the pattern actually was (1) research in an urban setting, (2) research in the Jewish community, and (3) research in an urban setting. What was the unique contribution of the Jewish

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research to understanding the learning and development of youth placed at risk? Thus, the research areas that emerged as important in Jewish educational settings, and not Judaism per se, were demonstrated to have value when investigating the extent to which schools promote the learning and development of youth.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that research that combines Jewish ideas and practices with the concepts and methods of the social sciences should not a priori be excluded from the public discourse on public education. In this chapter, the findings from research studies that were conducted in Jewish schools, camps, and youth groups are applied to urban schools that serve low-income, minority youth. The importance of these findings emerge from the realization that school reform today does not tend to address students' formation of a relationship with a group and the needs of society. Instead, there is a narrow focus on higher standards, better instruction, and more rigorous testing. Helping students to multiply their options and decreasing the number of those who are underprepared for future careers are youth development topics that go far beyond introducing a "developmentally appropriate" curriculum, raising standards, or establishing accountability measures. The longitudinal study in an urban setting demonstrated that the knowledge created in the Jewish community and Judaism's social values have much to offer the wider community by sharpening questions, contributing towards solving pressing educational challenges, and adding a distinctive values orientation.

Overview of Chapter

In this chapter, different approaches are presented on how to interweave Jewish texts and practices with social science research. On one level, Jewish ideas and values informed the development of a research instrument, the *Learning and Development Inventory (LDI)*, which was then used in urban public schools to evaluate the effectiveness of federally funded grants. In another instance, psychological concepts (e.g., future orientation) are explored in Jewish educative settings and then used to provide an explanatory framework for the success of urban, minority students. So, too, research from the social sciences and Jewish ideas and practices (e.g., Jewish teachings that discourage self-absorption and encourage awareness to people's interdependence) are seamlessly interwoven with social science research in order to address educational change.

Student Learning and Development: Self-Regulation

With self-regulation, success depends on having awareness of a problem and of an ideal outcome, skills to map out a strategy to solve the problem, and having a willingness and skill in persisting at and refining the strategy until a positive outcome is achieved. Students strengthen their self-regulation when they have an orientation

to the future and engage in goal setting as a way of articulating ideal outcomes. It is questioned as to what is the developmental process through which students increase their self-regulation capacity and what are the risks of inadequate self-regulation. Psychological development in students entails the increasing self-regulation of the natural psychological processes by voluntary ones. Luria (1976) outlines the voluntary psychological processes as “the laws of logical thought, active remembering, selective attention, and acts of the will in general which form the basis for the most complex and characteristic higher forms of human activity” (p. 5). According to Pintrich and Schunk (2003), successful self-regulation leads to effective social relations with peers, teachers, and family members; to high academic performance; and to optimal life opportunities. When students have inadequate self-regulation capability, asking them to set challenging goals can mean setting them up for failure. For these students, the end result is senseless violence, increased vulnerability, and/or diminished life outcomes.

Baumeister et al. (2010) explain that the term self-regulation is often used as a synonym for self-control. They write that “Regulation means change, but not just any change. Rather, it means bringing behavior into line with some standard” (p. 70). What is the challenge that students face when developing their self-regulation capacity? The key teaching of the Jewish text known as *Path of the Just* is that we must think. Frankel (2007) writes in his discussion of the text, “That might seem like an obvious lesson, but it takes work to put it into practice ... How about our interactions with others? Do we really think about the effect our words might have and even what effect we would want them to have? THINK! Think about where you are, think about where you want to go, think about how you’re going to get there. Think about the long term and think about the short term. In fact, think about everything you do.”

If, however, students were to “think!” all the time, the outcome may be counter-productive. As an award for thinking about everything that they do, students may feel justified in indulging now and then in self-injurious or maladaptive behavior. Continuously regulating behavior and emotions leads to ego depletion, an internal state in which mental energy reserves are exhausted (Baumeister et al. 2007). When students are faced with too many choices, they tend to become self-paralyzed. They may experience a numbness of the mind or a considerable lack of awareness of the environment around them. They may get into accidents or find themselves engaging in reckless behaviors. Conscious decision-making is intense in its consumption of attentional resources. Students’ successful self-regulation, and thus optimal performance, entails the ability to allocate and manage regulatory resources, so that high awareness and consciousness prevails when making key decisions, but quickly switches to habit when possible to conserve resources (see Carver and Scheier 1998). Effective, conscious self-regulation is the ability to overcome obstacles and focus on tasks using proactive and deliberative self-management (Schmeichel and Baumeister 2007). By contrast, the effectiveness of automatic self-regulation is measured by its efficiency and speed and its ability to function without active or conscious intervention (Carver 2007).

Research on Self-Regulation

Self-regulation can be (and often is) initiated and pursued automatically (see Fitzsimons and Bargh 2007 for an extensive review). Moreover, acting on the basis of a conscious intention can be less effective than reacting by instinct, as it can take longer to form the intention than actually carry out the action itself (Kelso 1995). Unconscious self-regulation does not deplete the person's limited self-regulatory capacity, as it happens automatically. Thus, it is more efficient for self-regulation to happen outside of conscious awareness and guidance (Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994). Once the person has established mental intentions to react in particular ways, the appropriate responses and the control processes necessary to implement them can be activated by social or environmental cues, without the need for the intervention of conscious choice. Once students have set a goal in their mind, it will be "shielded" or protected from distraction and derailment (Shah et al. 2002).

While we often have a heroic conception of self-regulation, whereby we valorize the person who exercises enormous self-restraint, effective self-management is best achieved when good choice making becomes habitual. A key way this can be done is through social and environmental cues that serve as subconscious stimulants, which trigger good behaviors. Gollwitzer and Schall (1998) refer to this as "implementation intentions," whereby if students link their behavior with the appearance of a particular external event or feature, this dramatically increases the likelihood that they will instinctively react in accordance with their original intention. This is because their mind is already pre-programmed to respond in the more adaptive manner, reducing the amount of conscious effort required to ensure an effective reaction. Another way of thinking about "implementation intentions" is to call them "if-then-plans."

These if-then-plans (implementation intentions) create a mental pairing of situational cues and courses of action that would normally be applicable to habitual activities (Gollwitzer and Schall 1998). Significantly, research shows that implementation intentions lead to speedy enactment of the desired behavior even under heavy cognitive load, when the person's self-regulatory capabilities are at their weakest. Implementation intentions facilitate goal-attainment by heightening the accessibility of both the forthcoming critical situation and the desired response, such that even if one is otherwise engaged, the desired reaction should occur automatically, swiftly, and efficiently (Gollwitzer et al. 2007, p. 213). Such mental priming is particularly useful when dealing with actions that are unpleasant or easy to forget (Gollwitzer et al. 2007). Delegating implementation to habit or "standard operating procedures" enhances self-control in the face of distractions and temptations by making the desired response automatic, thus helping the person resist temptation and distraction (Gollwitzer 1996).

Teachers may guide the class as a group to conceive of alternative ways to behave when a student rolls his eyes at another student's suggestion while engaged in a team project. As a group, they may decide on which course of action they will take if they should encounter this situation (to use Peter Gollwitzer's (1996) phrase, "If situation x is encountered, then I will perform behavior y"). In essence, this course

of action then becomes the standard to which students would regulate their behavior. Because they prepared themselves ahead of time, the likelihood is increased that their response would be below the threshold of choice. When an identical situation does occur, the students as a group could later analyze their thoughts at the time, their actions, and whether they met the standard. It is not the purpose of if-then-plans (implementation intentions) to preclude the use of conscious choice making. There are numerous situations in which implementation intentions would not work (i.e., when there are no external cues). Nevertheless, creating mental intentions supported by the external cues can dramatically improve the chances of a person making the right choice and will often ensure that this is achieved with little distraction or effort, therefore enabling the right choice to come at no cost to the attention and focus needed for other pressing concerns.

Belongingness is a Reason to Self-Regulate

Students' self-regulation is enhanced when students have a sense of belongingness or connectedness to family, friends, school, youth group, etc. In turn, this provides them with the commitment that they need to override self-absorbed and self-indulgent behaviors. Baumeister et al. (2010) note that belongingness is a reason to self-regulate (p. 74). As they write, "We suggested that expending limited resources for the sake of self-control is the price people pay to gain acceptance in society and thereby satisfy their fundamental need to belong. Put simply, people exert self-control for the rewards it can bring them in return ... Belongingness motivates self-control and virtuous choices" (p. 78). This self-identification strengthens students' resolve to follow the standards and customary ways of behaving of the schools, even at the cost of impulsive behaviors that give them great pleasure in the here and now. Consistent with this approach, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) define self-regulation as "how a person exerts control over his or her own responses so as to pursue goals and live up to standards" (p. 500).

Students who grow up in poorly functioning, disruptive, and/or insecure family networks and communities often do not experience the quantity and quality of interactions needed to adequately promote their self-regulation and thereby their academic learning. Students' connectedness with others promotes their engagement in educationally purposeful activities (Comer et al. 1999) and provides them with a sense of belongingness, which is a reason to self-regulate. In the 6-year longitudinal study described below, it was observed that the students with fewer adults who cared about them were more vulnerable to loneliness in school. The students who indicated "zero adults" care about what happens to them also had the highest rates of agreement with the following item, significantly differing from all the other students: "During this school year, another student has bullied me." These findings indicate that least-connected students had more challenges with interpersonal relations than more-connected students. One of the most important predictors of self-regulation was found to be the students' scores on this item: "At school, I try to hide my feelings from everyone."

The least-connected students also tended to have the lowest scores on “I have some very good friends at this school,” while the most-connected students had the top scores. Has the Internet alleviated students’ loneliness? Miller (2012) described a poll of 1000 people aged 18–35 conducted by Macmillan Cancer Support. The poll found that the average person has 237 Facebook friends, but just two whom they could rely on when faced with a serious problem. He writes, “Worryingly around a quarter of respondents said they had just one true friend while one in eight said they had no one at all” (p. 1). Kahlil Oppenheimer (2013), a Brandeis student, wrote in the campus newspaper *The Justice*:

As of writing this article, I have 1052 friends on Facebook, but it only feels equally, if not less, reassuring than my four close childhood friends. I was initially surprised by this observation, because more is better, right? But the connections I have made and maintained over Facebook and the persona I’ve created for myself feel artificial in comparison with real life. I cannot even imagine how content I’d feel if I had 1052 friends in real life and four Facebook friends (p. 7).

Oppenheimer concluded the article by saying, “We belong online and are alone in person.”

For a school to shape students’ self-regulation (and thereby their potential to enhance the societies in which they will live as adults), school reform cannot focus only on how the students have to change. It is all about relationships, including among all those who have a stake in the life success of the students. Teachers, too, have to change the way they work and interact with others. Promoting a sense of connectedness among students is one of the most important childhood roots of adult quality of life. In *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, Edward Hallowell (2002) states, “A connected childhood is the most reliable key to a happy life” (p. 91). The word “connected” in this statement refers to young people’s connectedness to family and school. Hallowell’s statement is based on the results of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which found that connectedness to school and home were the two most important protective factors for adolescents. The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health is a study mandated by Congress to identify risk and protective factors at the family, school, and individual levels as they relate to emotional health, violence, substance abuse, and sexuality in adolescents (American Youth Policy Forum 2004). Clearly, family connectedness and school connectedness were identified as protective against almost every health risk and likely to improve student well-being. On the other side of the equation, students’ development relies on their self-regulation. Learning and development are not spectator sports.

A Jewish Approach to Self-Regulation

Consider that students may know which of the two possible courses of action is in their best interests, and even understand the benefits and harms that are involved. When provoked by desire, however, their impulses may rule and they may act in

ways they later regret. Judaism offers models of both building up self-regulation. Judaism's approach to promoting students' self-regulation stands in contrast to "character" initiatives which focus on the sublimation and transformation of negative traits (e.g., reducing students' temptation to engage in disruptive, nonacademic behaviors in the classroom). Instead, the intent of the Jewish approach is to enhance and bolster students' capacity for self-regulation by focusing on cognitive-behavioral elements.

The Judaic tradition brings into play—in the lives of its strict adherents—continuous opportunities for comparatively manageable exercises in self-regulation, which build up a general capacity for using the conscious mind to make effective choices. Through negotiating a multitude of occasions for making relatively non-taxing but nevertheless meaningful acts of restraint, students develop an acceptance and predisposition towards rejecting temptation and making principled decisions. Highly demanding choices would create a high level of temporary malfunction, as students would suffer a considerable depletion in their self-regulatory capacity. Yet, the kind of efforts required in the practices which are described below are not so demanding that they cannot be inserted quite readily into a normal way of living without overwhelming the conscious mind.

Jewish ideas and practices offer insight into how cognitive-behavioral techniques may "disrupt" unconscious, internal responses to complex choices and, instead, raise the decision-making process to the level of conscious choice—so that students may intentionally regulate their responses. These techniques are part of the Mussar movement. The word "mussar" appears in the book of Proverbs, and it can mean "disciplined learning," "education," or "instruction." The Mussar movement emerged in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe to further spiritual and ethical development. The intent of the techniques is to disrupt unthinking, reactive behavior. Consider that the Yeshiva of New Haven uses Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's (1738) *Mesillat Yesharim* (*Path of the Just*) to instruct the students. In discussing the trait of watchfulness in Chap. 2, he writes: "The idea of watchfulness is for a man to exercise caution in his actions and his undertakings; that is, to deliberate and watch over his actions and his accustomed ways to determine whether or not they are good, so as not to abandon his soul to the danger of destruction, and not to walk according to the promptings of habit as a blind man in pitch darkness."

To illustrate, Jews who are scrupulous in their adherence to the kosher dietary laws have a clear moral mandate for guiding their selection of foods. On a daily basis, observant Jews are required to consider their choices and refrain from eating certain foods and thus selecting other choices. Recently, Tag scholar Shmuly Yanklowitz added a new dimension known as *Tav HaYosher* (ethical seal). The Tav HaYosher is a local, grassroots initiative to bring workers, restaurant owners, and community members together to create workplaces in kosher restaurants that are just and committed to human rights. Thus, in the areas in which the ethical seal is practiced, the choice is not only whether the leafy vegetables have been carefully checked to ensure that they have no bugs. Rather, the choice is whether the restaurant workers receive fair pay and have a safe work environment. The treatment of workers is not often thought about by people who are dining at a restaurant. This is

the type of mindfulness and intentionality upon which self-regulation is strengthened. Through it, a compass emerges that guides students as they make specific choices and take specific actions necessary to navigate in a complex society. This points the way to seeing that systems of meaning and values are critically important to the development of self-regulation, according to our colleague Isaac Schechter (2013) from the Institute for Applied Research and Community Collaboration.

A school or individual class could introduce a model of moral decision-making into the practices of the class, asking participants in the project to only purchase ethical food choices, to carefully assess the caloric content of foods, record the food they eat in a journal *before* they put it in their mouths, put a coin in a charity box for hungry children before eating any treats, institute meat-free days (to mirror the Jewish rule of not eating meat and dairy products together or one after another), to go for a period of time without any snacks or junk food, to do some exercises before eating, and so on. These and similar practices could help inculcate in students that eating should be a thoughtful practice, in which decisions and choices are made. In this way, students will increase their capacity for thinking before taking action and exercising personal control. The more they do so over time, the more deliberate their present and future actions will be.

Sefer HaHinukh, a thirteenth-century anonymous work which explains the reasons behind Jewish laws, explains that “the mind is drawn after one’s action,” meaning that students’ behaviors start to affect the way their minds work” (section “Positive 16”). The book explains that this is the reason for the practices of Judaism. The example the author offers is of eating unleavened bread on Passover and refraining from eating regular bread for 7 days. Small acts of self-regulation help to create a more self-regulated mind. These acts build up self-regulatory capacity. Small acts of self-restraint repeated continuously every day will enable self-regulation capacity to grow incrementally without causing major ego depletion. For example, the US military requires all soldiers to make their beds for the sake of promoting productivity throughout the remaining day. If one accomplishes a small but significant task early in one’s day (such as making a bed), one feels a small sense of pride and therefore is more likely to be incentivized to complete further tasks throughout the day, maintaining a more regimented mindset (McRaven 2014). Moreover, through continuously engaging in these acts, students become increasingly habituated; so they gain twice: once by building capacity and, twice, by attaining a comparatively high level of automation. Once students have reached a high level of automation, the task is to set the bar a bit higher and repeat the cycle. This is the Jewish concept of personal growth and character development.

A Note on Jewish Sources

There is no uniform, unbroken approach to education in Jewish sources. In this chapter, Proverbs, the Mishna, the Talmud, Rashi, Luzzato, the Mussar movement, Hasidut, and so on are made without distinctions among them. Some concepts men-

tioned are well known; others are known primarily within their particular communities (e.g., in this chapter appears the concept of *hachlata le'atid*, which is translated as future resolve). The use of Jewish sources in this chapter reflects Daf Yomi, the daily study of one page of the Talmud, in which concepts from a myriad of Jewish sources may be introduced to elucidate the issues on the page.

Two Jewish Ways to Build Self-Regulation Capacity

Consider the “Disconnect to Connect” initiative (Schechter, personal communication, 2013). Every week, on the Jewish Sabbath, observant Jewish students refrain from using cell phones and social media for 25 hours because no electrical devices (e.g., cell phones, computers, and televisions) are used. They disconnect despite their fervent desire to stay connected to their friends. Jewish students’ non-use of social media on the Sabbath has become engrained in their consciousness so that the non-use has become habituated (it is “below the threshold of choice”). Despite the high dependence on connectivity (bordering on addiction!) during weekdays, on the Sabbath, observant students demonstrate an incredible level of self-discipline. This capacity to exercise self-restraint—so vital for successfully accomplishing adult quality of life—is inculcated through a complex system of rituals and restrictions that develop the psyche to accept the need for and generate the capacity to be able to exercise choice even in the face of considerable temptation. Without their cell phones and access to social media, observant Jewish students tend to connect more with the people who are physically around them. Thus, the intent of our “Disconnect to Connect” initiative is to promote “electronic downtime” among students, increase their self-regulation, and encourage them to connect more with those who are physically close to them.

Those who are newly observant have to wean themselves away from the use of cell phones and social media on the Sabbath. There are two approaches within Judaism that provide guides for behavior in this instance. One approach is for students to fully admit how much they feel the urge to use social media and then build self-regulatory capacity by placing their cell phones in plain sight and resisting the temptation each and every time they see the phones. This approach may be called the “Rashi” approach after a statement made by this towering Jewish scholar. Jonathan Feiner, our colleague from the Institute for Applied Research and Community Collaboration (personal communication, 2013), notes that within each commandment, there are numerous details with profound psychological insights. For example, in analyzing the kosher dietary laws, Rashi quotes an ancient Jewish text (Leviticus 20:26) that states, “Do not say, I dislike the flesh of the pig, but rather, I like it but God has decreed that I abstain from it.” It builds more self-regulatory muscle to admit that one desires to eat non-Kosher food and then refrains from doing so than to convince oneself that the food is disgusting. With this, once students make the decision to refrain from certain foods or using the Internet on the Sabbath, they then do not need to rethink their decision every time they see food. In other words,

they do not experience ego depletion because refraining is below the threshold of choice. This is an illustration of the twofold nature of self-regulation: increasing the capacity (the “muscle”) and habituating the behavior so it is a preferred automatic response.

The problem with this approach is that it requires students to deliberately strain their self-regulation. Another approach is consistent with the Mussar movement. In this approach, students would decide between two options. For example, one could leave the cell phone in plain sight or one could hide the cell phone. Mussar teaches students to select the option in which they do not set themselves up for failure. In this case, the preferable path would be to hide the cell phone and thus not put oneself in a situation where temptation lurks.

When becoming religious, some may not have (yet!) the self-regulatory capacity to do this. As a first step, they may learn the laws regarding the use of cell phones on the Sabbath, and the reasons for these laws. As a second step, they may talk with observant Jews to learn their strategies. For the next step, they may pay attention to what they are thinking and feeling when they reach for the cell phone. Then they may steadily increase the amount of time that they refrain from using cell phones. In this case, the idea is to build self-regulation capacity through comparatively easy steps and then habituate them as much as possible to reduce the self-regulation load.

Some Examples of Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches Based on Jewish Ideas and Practices

Social and Environmental Context

Students’ social and environmental context may promote effective self-regulation or subvert it. To illustrate, the Jewish laws of *muktzah* (items that are set aside so that they are not moved on the Sabbath) offer a complex set of ideas about how to create an environment that is Sabbath-friendly. Observant students do not touch tools whose main purpose is for something forbidden on the Sabbath unless they plan to use them for something permitted (e.g., a hammer). Something that has no permissible use on the Sabbath (e.g., a pen) may not be used at all. If the *muktzah* item is in their way, students may use their elbows, for example, instead of their hands to move it so that they are less likely to unthinkingly use it. In short, there is a whole system in place to keep students well within their self-regulation capacity so that they do not flirt with a collapse of self-regulation. While exercising the comparatively manageable acts of restraint just described, the student is still building up self-regulation muscle strength. It is sufficiently strenuous to give some benefits while not requiring the kind of exertion that could lead to too much depletion. Walking this fine line is what Judaism is all about. The same may be said for the kosher dietary laws and many other aspects of Jewish law. Whereby under some circumstances there are leniencies to allow for self-regulation capacity not to be stretched

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