

What We Know About Experiential Jewish Education.

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Introduction

For over a century Jewish education in North America has proceeded along two parallel tracks: instruction in schools and socialization through contexts such as settlement houses, summer camps and Israel experiences (Sarna, 2006). As the field has matured, Jewish educators adopted the terms “formal” and “informal” education to describe these parallel tracks.

In this new century, it is time to question this simplistic distinction. Schools no longer limit their educational work to formal instruction and contexts such as camps and Israel experiences employ many different methods to accomplish their educational goals. While it is vital that Jewish education continues to operate through these different contexts, it may no longer be wise to divide those contexts into two parallel tracks (Zeldin, 2006). Rather, a more complex descriptive matrix is needed to map the terrain of Jewish education.

This chapter is one small step in that direction. Our focus is on “experiential Jewish education” which we understand to be an approach that can be employed in all these different settings. True, we will cite examples from what we now call “informal” settings but only because those are the contexts that we know best. Professor Joseph Reimer is the Director for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University. David Bryfman is a Doctoral student in Education and Jewish Studies at NYU focusing on the Jewish identity development of adolescents.

In principle what we are describing applies to any context in which educators seek to challenge participants to build Jewish knowledge and commitment from the basis of their experiences in this world. Ours is an integrative approach that asks what different contexts have in common and how Jewish educators who identify with those different contexts can learn from one another to promote experiential Jewish learning.

Experiential Jewish education is not a familiar phrase and our approach may be new for some readers. But we borrow freely from research and theory in a number of different domains to suggest that the time is ripe to rethink how we engage Jewish learners in discovering the power of Jewish concepts and practices to enrich the way they live their lives.

Beginning with Informal Jewish Education

There is a long oral tradition that defines informal educational practices in settings as diverse as Jewish camps, JCCs, youth movements, Hillel foundations and Israel experiences. But there has been a reluctance to commit that tradition to writing and to a systematic analysis of informal Jewish education. That reluctance has been overcome by Barry Chazan (2003), who has spelled out a clear, defensible philosophy of informal

Jewish education. Building on the work of Bernard Reisman (1979), Chazan has developed these key points:

1. While informal Jewish education takes place in many distinctive settings and is identified with well-known methods of educational practice, it is best thought of as an approach to Jewish education rather than being identified with any particular settings or methods. It is this approach that unifies the field.
2. Informal Jewish education is poorly named because “informal” suggests both a high degree of informality and an opposition to formal education. Clearly many informal educators are informal in their approach and would not choose to work in a school. But Chazan cautions against seeing those tendencies as defining the field.
3. Informal education is often identified with feeling rather than cognition and with fun rather than serious learning. While Chazan embraces the role that fun and feelings play in informal education, he also believes that serious cognitive learning has its place and would reject easy dichotomies between feeling and thinking, fun and learning.
4. Informal education is often thought of as taking place spontaneously as the educator seizes on a teachable moment to impress participants with his/her deep Jewish commitments. While informal educators do need the skills to seize upon such moments, Chazan emphasizes that much of the work of informal educators involves serious preparation to structure the environment so that the spontaneous can occur. What appears as magic moments result from good educational planning by seasoned professionals

At the heart of Chazan’s approach is a fundamental commitment, derived from Dewey (1938), to learning from experience. Informal education begins with the learner’s experiences. However, we are not talking about isolated experiences, but providing an overall blueprint of Jewish experiences that participants can anticipate as part of a well-planned informal Jewish educational program. Those planned experiences should take place in a stable, supportive educational environment whose very culture educates. It is a place where the participants can breathe in the air of Jewish values. In that environment participants should have as their role models holistic Jewish educators who teach by example and know how to shape the experience of others. These educators’ genuine interest in the participants’ lives and their openness to sharing their own commitments forms the soil from which the values of this educational approach grow.

It is hard to read Reisman and Chazan and not be impressed with the seriousness of their message. But while Chazan labels this approach “informal Jewish education,” Reisman refers to the same approach as “Jewish experiential education.” Chazan states that “informal Jewish education is rooted in a belief that the experience is central to the individual’s Jewish development” (2003); but he does little to explain how “experience”

is actually educative. By not tackling these knotty questions, both Reisman and Chazan have left this field in a bit of a conceptual bind.

Distinguishing Informal from Experiential Jewish Education

In our view Chazan has made a significant contribution, but is off the mark in referring to this approach as a “philosophy of informal Jewish education.” When we have looked at how the term “informal education” is used in the general education literature, it does not map well to Chazan’s usage. Second, if we were to follow the logic of his argument, we would have to conclude that most of what informal Jewish educators actually do in their practice would not meet the criteria he has set for defining “informal Jewish education.” It is self-defeating to set such lofty criteria for what constitutes “informal Jewish education” and we prefer to create a classification that is more inclusive of what we observe educators doing in their regular practice.

We therefore suggest that “informal Jewish education” be used as a broad umbrella term that refers to the familiar settings of Jewish education outside of schools. We will use “experiential Jewish education” as the term to describe what educators do to promote experientially-based Jewish learning. We hypothesize that experiential Jewish learning involves three distinct initiatives, each with its own set of goals:

- Recreation
- Socialization
- Challenge

Recreation - As recreation, experiential Jewish education aims to provide its participants with social comfort, fun and belonging in a Jewish context. Experiential Jewish education operates primarily as a set of leisure-time activities. Participants voluntarily choose to participate in the programs that are offered. They must enjoy these activities or they will cease to attend. As recreation, Jewish experiential education provides safe space for Jews to enjoy the company of other Jews in pursuing common cultural activities.

Socialization - As socialization, experiential Jewish education aims to provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be an active member of the Jewish community. When people feel part of a social unit, they begin to identify with its procedures, rules and world view. They want to belong and become an identifiable “member” of that unit. We call that process of identification “socialization.” In the Jewish world, we encourage participants to identify with a Jewish group and to internalize those behaviors, attitudes and feelings that characterize members of that group. We also encourage their identifying with the Jewish people in some broader sense.

Challenge - As experiential educators, Jewish educators aim to encourage participants to undertake the challenge of stretching themselves and growing towards a more complex participation in one’s Jewish life. Because there is a lot more to Judaism than participating skillfully in the activities of one’s Jewish camp or youth

movement, experiential educators need to motivate individuals to stretch beyond their comfort zone and creatively explore a variety of Jewish modes of expression.

To explore how these three initiatives might operate, let's take the example of a group's singing Jewish songs. How might teaching Jewish songs in an informal setting differ in terms of goals depending on which of these three initiatives is guiding the educator's practice?

At the *recreational level*, the primary goal is to create an environment in which all the participants are comfortable singing with one another. The song leader might choose songs that everyone knows and can enjoy. It does not really matter how well participants sing as long as they are enjoying singing with other Jews. It does not even matter if all the songs are Jewish songs, for singing popular American songs also works well when social togetherness and having fun define the primary goals of the event.

At the *socialization level*, the primary goal is to have the participants identify as Jews singing Jewish songs. The song leader might introduce some familiar songs from Israel. Here the words do matter for the goal is to identify with Israel. Singing the song will become enjoyable once the participants learn the words and music. Educators at this level usually aim for a balance between what is enjoyable and comfortable and what will help reinforce the Jewish identities of the members of the group.

At the level of *challenge*, exploration *is* the point. This can take many forms. Someone might introduce a more complex arrangement of an old, familiar song. Perhaps a song leader demands greater skill in learning how to sing a Jewish song in the "right way." Perhaps the group strives to sing with great spiritual intensity. All these moves involve greater concentration and learning; but when the participants rise to these challenges, they often feel more accomplished and satisfied.

We claim that each of these initiatives has its own integrity and value. We cannot imagine how any program in Jewish education could dispense with the recreational level or skip over the socialization level. All three initiatives are necessary aspects of a holistic Jewish education. At the same time we are privileging the level of challenge as most fully embodying the philosophic approach that Chazan spells out. We do so because we believe in the values of exploration and growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and want to see experiential Jewish education aim to challenge Jews to creatively engage with their Judaism (Kaplan, 1934).

Experiential Jewish Learning

Some educators might object to our approach and say: "These are all examples of experiential Jewish education. Singing is an experiential act. The difference is in the degree of difficulty and challenge, but all singing is experiential."

That is a valid objection, but we are trying to distinguish having an experience from experiential learning. Singing around a camp fire can be a wonderfully rich experience.

But is it designed to promote Jewish learning? We think not. The value and intention of such an experience is recreational: it builds good group feeling and social comfort. That is all for the good, but not the same as experiential Jewish learning. For learning involves exploration, risk and breaking new cognitive and emotional grounds.

It is much harder to distinguish between socialization and learning from challenge. Sociologists like Berger and Luckmann (1967) would argue the validity of our distinction. For socialization does involve new social-cognitive learning. An educator cannot get to the level of challenge without passing through socialization.

But we are following the psychologist L.S. Vygotsky (1978) who proposed that educators think of creating a “zone of proximal development” in which participants can be guided and supported to try out new learning that may move them towards the levels of their potential development. In simpler terms, we are distinguishing between when an educator is reinforcing what participants already know and value and when she is challenging what participants know and promoting their development towards a more complex understanding of and a deeper spiritual bond with their Judaism. *We view experiential Jewish education as more than reinforcing of existing commitments. It should aim as well to inspire participants to experience Jewish living at its creative best.*

In our view it is not enough for experiential Jewish education to provide “the Jewish air” that participants can breathe. That is a fine goal for Jewish socialization. But engaged Jewish youth will grow into the creative leaders of tomorrow’s Jewish community only if today they learn to deal with complexity and risk. Experiential Jewish education is uniquely positioned to promote learning from challenge. Whether they are struggling with how to alleviate world hunger or bridge the gaps between diverse Jewish populations, engaged youth need to experience their Judaism as a serious arena for generating substantive responses to the deepest challenges their generation will face.

Overview of Related Research

In a field that is conceptually underdeveloped, the scarcity of literature on informal and experiential Jewish education is not surprising. What surprises us is the lack of research which considers the variety of informal Jewish education contexts as constituting a single field. Very few researchers have recognized that the various informal educational settings constitute a singular field of experiential Jewish education.

Only the work of Chazan (2003), based on the earlier work of Reisman (1979), has attempted to define the field of informal Jewish education and articulate the elements that constitute this endeavor. A second attempt to explain experiential Jewish education is found in Reisman and Reisman (2002) which includes articles by various academics and practitioners that appeared previously in the May, 2001 edition of *Sh’ma*, entitled, “Informal Education: Practitioners’ Perspectives.”

In recent years, spurred largely by the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, there has been an increased interest in the role in which informal Jewish

education plays in the identity development of young Jews. The most ambitious of all experiential educational programs has been the Taglit-birthright Israel programs, involving 100,000 young adult Jews. The most recent study of the birthright Israel experience reports that the program is “achieving its fundamental goals of building Jewish identity, as a sense of Peoplehood, and a connection to Israel” (Saxe, Sasson, & Shahar, 2006, p.2). These findings have been echoed in the most recent works focusing on Jewish residential summer camps that analyze why the camping environment can have a powerful influence on the development of positive Jewish identity (Lorge & Zola, 2006; Sales & Saxe, 2004).

The theme of positive Jewish identity development also framed the chapter about the field in the first edition of *What We Know About Jewish Education*. Sporadic articles have also appeared in popular publications that have largely focused on the contexts and their impact on Jewish identity rather than on the processes taking place as part of experiential Jewish education.

Given the impressive number of informal Jewish educational programs available, the lack of literature dedicated to this field is concerning. Yet more dollars than ever before are being spent on developing informal education programs in North America. This disparity is tempered somewhat by anecdotal evidence suggesting that informal Jewish education organizations are conducting internal evaluations of their programming. When done well, evaluation studies allow us to learn more about which factors contribute to educational effectiveness.

In recent years the Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University and the University of Judaism are examples of institutions of higher education with programs that look specifically at the broader phenomenon of experiential Jewish education. The Cohen Center at Brandeis University has taken a leading role in evaluation studies.

Given the lack of attention to experiential Jewish education as a whole, it is necessary to move beyond the limited research in the specific field and seek out other literature which informs the field. The publication of *Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader*, edited by Bekerman, Burbules and Silberman-Keller (2006) is the most recent general education book which should influence experiential Jewish education. This book illustrates several ways in which informal education can transform current educational practices into more powerful learning experiences.

Looking further afield it is clear that many of the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of other educational contexts resonate with experiential Jewish education. Three such fields are outdoor education, museum education and the use of technology in education. By highlighting core components of these fields we are able to broaden our understanding of experiential Jewish education and the various challenges which it faces.

In the United States the term experiential education is most commonly associated with outdoor education or adventure learning. In recent years Jewish summer camps have invested significant amounts of money in ropes courses, climbing towers, adventure

equipment and the training that accompanies such activities. But while Jewish summer camps often offer these activities, these are not the only features which link the adventure learning and Jewish summer camps. The outdoor education movement highlights physically challenging experiences, primarily within peer group frameworks as integral to the moral development of individual youth. While rarely relying on such survival challenges, experiential Jewish education has cultivated group experiences as a means of socializing individuals within a broader set of communal norms. While one would be hard-pressed to claim that rock climbing should be equated with the struggle to analyze a complex ethical dilemma, the concept of “challenge,” albeit dependent on context, operates within both contexts. The young Jewish person who struggles to navigate his/her personal identity in the broader context of Jewish tradition at least metaphorically resembles the Boy Scout, who, with compass in hand, attempts to find his way back to base camp. For Jewish education to reach the level of experiential education espoused in outdoor education, it would need to elevate challenge as a fundamental goal and look to stretching learners beyond their comfort zones in many experiential activities.

A personal experience of learning is also the guiding philosophy behind a significant current movement within museum education. This philosophy advocates that the role of the exhibit is to actively engage patrons to construct their own knowledge based on the display rather than the museum providing all information for the learner. This is commonly adopted in the genre of children’s and science museums which have become regular features in the lives of many young learners. In a recent visit to the Chabad-sponsored Jewish Children’s Museum in Brooklyn, we saw scores of young children engaged in learning Jewish history, values and traditions through a hands-on approach to learning. They were laughing and smiling as they eagerly moved from exhibit to exhibit.

There is much that the experiential Jewish educator can learn from these museum displays. In the Children’s Museum the children are learning with the display, and not necessarily from it. This does not imply that the educator is absent from the learning experience. In both the interactive museum and classroom, the display and the educator are integral to both learning processes. Their role is to facilitate the learner’s individual experience and not adopt a stance in which they are the purveyors of all knowledge. But the challenge for educators who develop museum exhibits is to consider what the child at the museum has learned from their interaction with the display and how the educator can help that learning advance and connect to other learning contexts.

Within experiential Jewish education the educator is sometimes referred to as a *madrich*, a word whose Hebrew root is “way.” The implication being that the educator’s role is to show the way for learners rather than direct them down a specific path. Just as the museum does not forsake content, the experiential Jewish educator must also strive to ensure that important knowledge is not forsaken even as the educator invests more in the process of learning and less on traditional means of assessing knowledge gained.

Experiential Jewish educators also need to pay greater attention to current trends in technology. Current advances in the digital age have tremendous potential to impact both the practical and theoretical aspects of the experiential Jewish world. Educators need to

know about technology to remain relevant to the lives of the learner, but they also can take advantage of new theories and resources that new technology offers. The plethora of Jewish websites that fill the internet may disguise the fact that, in general, Jewish education has been slow to adopt new technologies. Only very recently have Jewish organizations begun to consider, for example, the benefits of iPods and “MySpace” style communities.

Current theories behind advances in the uses of technology can greatly benefit the experiential Jewish educator. For example, a recent discussion with an interactive designer revealed an innovative digital billboard game proposed to appear in Times Square. Using their cell phone key-pads, pedestrians will be able to uncover matching squares to reveal a potential prize from a major cosmetics company. This level of interactivity is new to the world of advertising but may be at the forefront of future marketing strategies. Interactivity has also been vital in the video game industry, which is predicated on a concept of *telepresence*, the experience of being present in an environment by means of a communication medium that could improve learners’ motivation and increase the meaningfulness and desire to be part of the learning environment (Winn & Jackson, 1999).

Edwin Schlossberg (1998) defines interactive design as that which involves the audience in a compositional or collaborative meaningful experience. Whether it be playing a video game or interacting with a digital billboard, this level of interactivity is designed to allow learners to enter into a state of flow – learning which requires concentration, high skills, a sense of control and satisfaction, all of which enable the participant to become immersed in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The challenge for experiential Jewish educators will be to create sophisticated programming that can engage youth at that level of intensity in meaningful Jewish experiences.

In these examples of outdoor education, museum education and technology we can see how the field of experiential Jewish education can benefit from research conducted in other fields. These are by no means the only spheres of learning that experiential Jewish education can learn from. Studies within education, sociology, psychology, anthropology, to name a few fields of research, should all contribute to our broader understanding of experiential Jewish education.

We are hopeful the day will come when experiential Jewish education will have a literature of its own. Ultimately, it is possible to imagine a time when the relationship would become reciprocal, with practices from the experiential Jewish education world also informing other fields within broader experiential education.

Implications and/or policy recommendations

Experiential Jewish education has been plagued by a lack of definition resulting in vague goals being established for the field as a whole. As a result educators have trouble generating identifiable benchmarks by which to assess their accomplishments. Often

they are left counting the number of attendees and the return rate to subsequent events. Those numbers surely matter, but they tell little about the educational value of a program.

Understanding that experiential educational programs operate on three distinct levels can help clarify the goals and effectiveness of these programs. One can ask about any given program:

- (a) On a recreational level, were the participants made to feel socially comfortable? Did they enjoy the company of others? Did they find the activities engaging and stimulating? Did they have fun coming to this event and are they likely to return for more?
- (b) On a socialization level, did the participants begin to identify with this group of people? Might they want to deepen their connections to them? Was it clear to them that this was a Jewish event? Were there sufficient opportunities for them to engage with Jewish symbols, practices and values and begin to make them their own?
- (c) On a challenge level, were there opportunities to try new ways of expressing one's Judaism? Were there new ideas or practices that some may have experienced for a first time? Were there other kinds of people to interact with and learn from? Was there time to reflect on what those experiences meant to participants?

Not every program needs to meet in equal measure all three levels; but every educator needs to be aware to he or she is aspiring and what success will look like. Surely, though, best practice in this field should be defined as meeting a variety of clear goals on all three levels.

- Experiential Jewish education has been short on challenge. Educators facing difficulties in marketing their programs often respond by focusing on recreation. They want to be sure that participants will have fun. But they fail to consider that there are so many ways to have fun in our culture that Jewish programming may do better by focusing on unique challenges that will draw niche markets. That is what museums and adventure education often do with positive results. Jewish educators need to reconsider their efforts to provide recreation where what they offer is not unique and instead develop niche areas where their offerings would be exceptionally attractive.
- A lack of professional preparation for experiential Jewish educators has resulted in many programs hiring unskilled amateurs who simply replicate what they experienced in their teens years in youth group or at camp. Nothing fails more consistently than recycling old programs for a new generation. This is a field that needs to prepare educators who understand all three levels and how they operate and interact with one another. Some of these educators also need to be comfortable innovating. Technology is but one prime example of needed

innovation. This is a field where centers of innovation and diffusion are keys to success.

- Experiential Jewish education cannot be limited to the traditional contexts of informal education. While camps, JCC's, youth movements, Hillel foundations and Israel experiences will continue to be vital settings, the borders of this field need to be constantly expanding. We have already mentioned the newer areas of adventure, museums and virtual reality; but other areas already developing include Jewish film-making, drama, global travel, virtual reality and meditative practices. Funders and educators need to be looking to expand thoughtfully in these and other new directions.
- Schools need a greater share of quality experiential Jewish education. The boundaries between the formal and informal are rapidly falling in school education, both in day and congregational schools; but many school educators are not prepared to successfully incorporate experiential learning into their repertoire. Anyone can show a film, have a discussion and serve Jewish foods. But it takes considerable educational skill to move from "providing experiences" to "stimulating experiential learning." Considerable effort needs to be invested in helping school educators learn to how to structure experiential moments that are rich in Jewish learning –as well as fun-for their students.

Additional research questions to be addressed

- What types of learning are taking place within experiential Jewish education? What are the processes involved in the learning and how do they compare with other educational experiences?
- What is being learned in experiential Jewish education? How does this compare to what is taking place in more formal educational settings?
- What types of research methodologies are best suited to studying the impact of experiential Jewish education?
- Who are the experiential Jewish educators? What skills, knowledge and dispositions should characterize these educators?
- What conditions need to be in place for experiential Jewish education to take place effectively within formal educational environments?
- Why are a minority of Jewish teens involved in experiential Jewish education and what can be done to attract and retain more teens?
- What relevance does the research on experiential Jewish education for youth have for other demographic cohorts including younger children, young adults and adults?

Conclusion

Getting beyond the simplistic distinctions between formal and informal education may encourage a surge of creativity from educators to explore the rich opportunities that each has for promoting experiential Jewish learning. We believe that a well-defined approach to experiential Jewish education is an important step in helping Jews to both re-commit to enduring Jewish values and to creatively explore how those values can guide meaningful living when facing the challenges that confront us all on this precious, but endangered planet.

Highlights of the article

- There is a long tradition of informal education settings in North America, even though relatively little has been written about the field.
- Informal Jewish Education is a broad category of contexts outside of schools which includes the three major goals of recreation, socialization and experiential education. Experiential Jewish education is more than having a Jewish experience. It involves exploration, taking risks and breaking new cognitive ground.
- While the term informal Jewish education is most commonly used, it is more precise to describe what is taking place in various contexts as experiential Jewish education.
- With little literature about experiential Jewish education, turning to related fields - including outdoor education, museum education and technology - can be very instructive. Experiential Jewish educators must learn from related fields if they are to remain relevant.
- Experiential Jewish education currently stands in the paradoxical position of being recognized as a formidable force for shaping Jewish identities while also being seen as significantly underdeveloped in clarifying its principles and identifying the conditions that assure its educational success.

So much of Jewish education today aims to build a felt connection between youth and the Jewish world. But people can feel only those connections that they have experienced. Connection and identity are shaped by our thoughts, but fueled by our emotions. Experiential education - whether at home, in a group setting or via the media- is the best route to connection. Understanding how to effectively utilize experiential education for Jewish purposes is the urgent agenda for the whole Jewish community.

Annotated Bibliography

Bekerman, Z., N. C. Burbules, Silberman-Keller, D. (Eds.) (2006). Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Useful for academics, professionals and lay leaders looking to transform education by adopting informal educational practices, Bekerman, et. al., incorporate multiple disciplines within a variety of global contexts. A series of articles by internationally recognized researchers contributes to understanding what informal education is and how it can be implemented in a variety of settings.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Culminating 30 years of research Csikszentmihalyi, a professor in psychology, uses the interviews from 91 prominent respondents to answer the question of what makes these people creative. Written to appeal to both to scholars and general readers Csikszentmihalyi helps us understand creativity, and the parameters necessary to establish learning environments that encourage discovery and invention.

Hein, G. E. (1998). Learning in the Museum. London: New York: Routledge.

Hein addresses some of the recent popular trends in museum education, in particular audience-centered and informal museum learning. A compilation of current museum learning theory, Hein suggests that the constructivist museum is the ideal approach for museums to adopt. The writer looks specifically at the ways in which patrons make meaning of their museum visits.

Informal Education Website: <http://www.infed.org>

This continually updated web site, edited in Great Britain, is an excellent resource for different types of informal educators. With over 100 articles and original pieces, the encyclopedia provides a comprehensive survey of informal education and lifelong learning. This site also draws attention to the subtle yet important differences between the use of the term “informal education” in different cultural contexts.

Mayer, R.E. (2001). Multimedia Learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Multimedia presentations provide a situation where people can learn from both words and pictures. Mayer summarizes ten years of research looking at multimedia learning from a cognitive perspective. The design principles articulated provide the basis for much of our understanding of the current trends within cognitive learning as it is applied in technology and education.

Smith, T.E., Roland, C.C., Havens, M.D., Hoyt, J.A., (1992). The Theory and Practice of Challenge Education. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Smith, et.al. offer a variety of perspectives that will assist anyone interested in understanding challenge education and implementing it within their educational framework. The perspectives are useful to practitioners and academics endeavoring to gain an overall perspective on challenge education.

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