

WHAT SHOULD WE LEARN IN SCHOOL?

Overview

This resource unpacks the issue of **Educational Inequality** through the value of **Innovation**.

At-a-Glance:

This resource provides an opportunity to explore the value of innovation as it connects to the issue of educational inequality. It prompts us to think broadly and expand the scope of what is considered a valuable education. The Talmudic narrative of Hillel the Elder offers an entry point and grounding for discussion about different models for education. It ends with an opportunity to evaluate different models of education and consider the assets and challenges of each of them, using innovation as a key barometer for building more equitable educational opportunities and communities.



MATERIALS AND SET-UP

Timing:

30-35 minutes

Best Uses:

- To be paired with a service activity component

Materials Needed:

- Pen and paper for the Make Meaning & Take Action section



FRAME THE ISSUE (5 MINUTES)

Read the passage below:

Educational inequality is the unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to school funding, qualified teachers, experienced administrators, adequate materials, books, and technologies, to socially excluded communities. Individuals belonging to these marginalized groups are often denied access to schools with adequate resources. Inequality leads to vast differences in educational success, and as a result, individuals are often held back from achieving higher levels of social, intellectual and economic mobility.

Facilitator prompts the group:

▷▷ What brought you today to be part of this educational service opportunity?



EXPLORE THE VALUE (8 MINUTES)

Read the passage below:

Educational inequality is rooted not only in a lack of resources and barriers to access for many individuals, but also impacted by structural intersectional issues, such as systemic racism, taxation systems, geographic realities, and overall political and economic forces.

One major force contributing to educational inequality is a limited way of thinking about what constitutes an “ideal education.” Our educational system rests on traditional models and metrics for what is considered a valuable education – traditional classrooms, lectures, and reliance on testing scores, as just some examples.

But what would it look like if society were more innovative in its ideal educational models, and prioritized things like lived experiences? Acquired skillsets? Individual capacities? Might that contribute to balancing the playing field? What would it look like if a job description asked for a Bachelor’s degree, *or* “equivalent lived experience”? How might an educational system that valued technical prowess, craft and trade as much as it does math, science and English ultimately result in one that is more equitable?

Innovation as a core value rests on the constant development of new designs and ideas, putting them into practice in an effort to improve the status quo. While many sectors of our society have been on the leading forefront of innovative models, our educational systems have not, and are quite traditional in their scope and approach.

There are many benefits to the models as they exist, but there are also downsides. Expanding our definition of education could create more expansive pathways, ultimately leading to a system that is more equitable. What are the up-sides and down-sides of both models?

Facilitator prompts the group:

- ▶▶ How might innovation and a broader model for what education looks like, give more equitable access to opportunities?
- ▶▶ What are some potential downsides of adopting a more expansive way of thinking about what constitutes a “valuable” education?



JEWISH ANCHOR (8 MINUTES)

Read the following text in havruta, with a partner, and then discuss the questions that follow:

The Talmud (Tractate Yoma 35b) recounts a narrative in the early life of the great rabbinic sage Hillel the Elder. Each day of work laboring as a woodcutter, he would earn a small amount of money, half of which he gave to the guard of the Beit Midrash to gain entry to study, and half he spent supporting himself and his family. There was a time that he did not have employment, and as a result the guard of the Beit Midrash did not let him enter. To keep up with his learning, he went up to the roof of the Beit Midrash and sat at the edge of the skylight to hear the words of Torah being studied inside. One Shabbat evening, snow fell upon him on the roof. At dawn, the scholars inside were surprised that the Beit Midrash – which was usually light at that time – was dark. When they looked up, they saw the image of Hillel in the skylight. They went to the roof and found him covered in snow. They pulled him out, washed him, put oil on his body and sat him opposite the bonfire to warm him.

Discuss the following questions in pairs, then facilitator ask for reflections from the group:

- ▶▶ Consider Hillel's work as a woodcutter. How does that impact your view of his capacities?
- ▶▶ What would it take for Hillel to get *into* the Bet Midrash? On the flipside, what would it take to get others *out onto* the roof? What might that do for them?
- ▶▶ How might we create a structural system so that Hillel does not feel like he *had to* climb on the roof? In what way could that alleviate problems of educational inequity?

BREAK FOR SERVICE EXPERIENCE

As you go through your service activity today, listen to what people are saying that can inform your own choices. What are some words and phrases that come up (keep a list) that can help guide you toward thinking about innovation as a path to a more equitable model of education?



MAKE MEANING & TAKE ACTION (8 MINUTES)

Read the following and follow the prompts below:

Ups and Downs: Varying Models

Working towards a more innovative model of education and ultimately shifting the realities of inequality can seem like an impossible task for any one person to consider. And yet, there are individual choice points in our lives where we are pressed to make decisions that draw on our values and – in the aggregate – can have far-reaching impact. Recognizing what helps and what harms within each choice can greatly alter the educational ecosystem.

The exercise below gives us the opportunity to apply the value of innovation both to educational choices and to other choices impacted by education.

Consider each of the following choice points as they relate to the value of innovation. For each, list 2-3 assets and challenges involved in making the choice - use the accompanying worksheet.

1. Hiring someone with a non-traditional educational background.
 - Assets
 - Challenges
2. Eliminating educational degrees as pre-requisites for work.
 - Assets
 - Challenges
3. Choosing a non-traditional schooling choice for your own family.
 - Assets
 - Challenges
4. Advocating for outdoor education to be a core part of higher education requirements.
 - Assets

- Challenges

Facilitator prompts the group to reflect:

Look at your lists above.

With a *havruta*, in pairs, compare your answers.

- ▷▷ Does anything surprise you? What? Why?
- ▷▷ Identify the areas in your life where there is room for innovative educational models. What commitments can you take in the coming month to make one of those more of a reality?
- ▷▷ What holds you back from doing so?
- ▷▷ How can service work on the ground shift the choices you make?



CLOSE WITH INTENTION (3 MINUTES)

Read the passage below:

The exploration above prompted us to think about the value of innovation as it relates to the issue of educational inequality. Expanding the scope of what constitutes a valuable education, to include things like lived experience, will allow for a more broadly conceived and equitable educational landscape. Using the Talmudic narrative of Hillel the Elder as a frame encourages us to think about our own choice points and decisions made as we work to balance the educational landscape.

Facilitator prompts the group:

- ▷▷ After engaging in service today wearing a lens of innovation, I now commit to ...