

Chassidus Curriculum Rationale

Sara Rosenfeld – Bais Rivkah, Melbourne, Australia

Why a Curriculum?

The importance of having a curriculum cannot be overestimated. As a Chabad Chassidic school, we all know the importance of teaching Chassidus. Most Chabad schools have a given time slot for the teaching of Chassidus.

Incorporated in this Chassidus “curriculum” is the expectation (usually never explicitly stated) that the students will learn about the history of Chassidus, the Rabbeim, history of Chabad Chassidus, what Chassidus is, special Yomim Tovim and dates, concepts in Chassidus, Chassidic texts, Chassidic stories, different Chassidic minhagim and more. The underlying rationale is usually that this knowledge will allow the students to be able to lead their lives in a Chassidic manner.

At the moment the Curriculum in most schools is not structured. It is really left to the discretion of the principals or the teachers of the particular subject to decide how and what will be taught.

In schools where the curriculum is more structured it is still usually only guide lines of particular texts or Yomim Tovim but not within a structure of what will be taught in each particular year level.

Needless to say this has caused a number of difficulties.

- ❖ There are some topics that get taught each year while other topics are never taught at all.
- ❖ The texts that are chosen are chosen randomly and are not always appropriate for the cognitive level of the student
- ❖ The random choice of topics does not allow the student to develop a complete picture of how various concepts in Chassidus are related to each other.
- ❖ Students may understand topics but do not grasp the topics well enough to be able to explain them to others.
- ❖ Sometimes the Chassidus class turns into a Farbrengen type of class or a time to learn Niggunim without any formal learning of any specific topics.
- ❖ Sometimes even if the texts chosen are appropriate for the age of the student, difficulties are encountered in the terminology and phrases used. There might be unfamiliar Chassidic terms that the girls do not know and that therefore hinder their complete understanding of the text.
- ❖ Another added difficulty is the lack of specific school textbooks or workbooks in the various topic areas.

In the light of the above, it becomes quite obvious that there is a tremendous need to have a very structured and specific Chassidus curriculum.

What Can Schools Do?

Ideally, each school needs to have one person responsible for each specific subject curriculum. This person would be responsible to:

- Lead the development of a comprehensive Chassidus curriculum for all year levels. This may need to be after consultation with teachers, parents and students as appropriate.
- Lead the team of Chassidus teachers in the school
- Be a resource person and advisor to all teachers of Chassidus.
- Ensure that all teachers follow the Chassidus curriculum.
- Constantly re-evaluate the success of the program and adjust and make changes as appropriate.

Ideally, each school needs to have its own Chassidus curriculum. This is comprised of two elements:

1) The What 2) The How.

What- Here we are talking really about three things we want our students to have when they graduate from our school:

- What specific skills we want (What will the student be able to do?)
- What values we want (What will the student appreciate and identify with personally?)
- What specific knowledge they will gain (What will the student know?)

The next element is the how – How will we go about teaching these skills, values and this knowledge?

- The first step must be to take the area of “What” (skills, values and knowledge) and develop the master list for the end of 12th grade.
- Step two is to take this master list and divide it into the different year levels. Here is where we must begin to take a look at the structure and hierarchy of the various concepts. What information or skills need to be taught as foundations to other concepts or skills?
- Step three is to decide which “subjects” will be offered to best address the goals and objectives in Chassidus for that particular year level.
- Step four will be more subject specific. What exactly will be learned in that subject? (Which specific Perakim in Tanya, which specific Sichos of the Rebbe, Which specific Rabbeim or which specific aspects of their lives etc.)
- Step five, but definitely not less important than the previous four steps, is how they will be taught. The success of ensuring that the students learn the skills we want them to have, internalize the values we wish to impart and retain the information is largely dependant on HOW we go about teaching the students.
 - Are we role models for what we are teaching?
 - Are we organized and structured?
 - Are we explicitly teaching them the skills we want them to have?
 - Are we addressing all the students’ needs by varying our modes of teaching and assessment?(Are we addressing all of the seven (or eight) of the intelligences?)

At Beth Rivkah in Melbourne, we have taken the steps outlined above and we have developed what we believe is a very effective, structured and thorough approach to the teaching of Chassidus.

Each level has been carefully planned and designed to meet the appropriate needs of the students at each particular year of their school life.

Our aim is to ensure that our students are familiar with minhagim and hanhagos and history of Chassidus as well as Chassidic concepts. We also aim to give our students the skills to be able to successfully learn primary Chassidic texts.

Students who have completed our full program as it has been designed, have been able to take their places at the top of leading seminaries around the world. They are able to learn Tanya and Sichos independently and have a strong foundation on which to continue building their skills in the more advanced study of Maamarim.

In grades Prep- 6, the curriculum is an outline of a series of outcomes, indicators, content, resources and suggested learning activities. The main emphasis at this stage is Chassidic minhagim and hanhagos and Chabad history.

In Year 7 we begin a structured study of Chassidic concepts. This continues until the end of year 11. With the aid of specifically designed student workbooks called “Chassidus Basics”, students are taught the fundamental concepts of Chassidic philosophy in a very structured and thorough manner. Throughout the process, students are encouraged to develop their thinking skills and to reflect and apply the concepts to their daily lives. Key Hebrew phrases and terminology are taught at each year level and constantly reviewed as new concepts are introduced. Much emphasis is placed on showing the connections between all the key concepts.

In year 9, after just two years of this formal study (when taught once a week), students are very well equipped to begin the study of Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah. Since they have already studied many of the key concepts found in this section of Tanya, these lessons are aimed at developing their skills in learning the text itself. They revisit the familiar concepts and begin to understand them in a more sophisticated manner. Tanya lessons are in addition to the other Chassidus lessons where concepts are continued in preparation for the study of Likkutei Amarim which begins in Year 11.

Study of Likkutei Sichos, in their original form, also begins at this level. Once again, many concepts are already familiar to the students and the emphasis is therefore placed on the skill of learning a Sicha and on the

appreciation of how the fundamental aspects of Chassidus appear time and time again in various different Sichos and in various different contexts.

Once students begin the study of Likkutei Amarim in Year 11, they are able to learn it much more easily and at a more rapid pace than students who begin their study of Tanya with Likkutei Amarim without the same structured background study.

A key rationale for the development of the program in the manner outlined above is the realistic view of the fact that we cannot teach the entire text of the Tanya or all of Likkutei Sichos in the short amount of time that students spend in school.

We therefore aim to teach the fundamental concepts outside of the text so that many more concepts can be studied in depth before our students leave school. We find that the time spent in this manner does not take away from the study of the text, but actually enhances it and makes the textual study a goal that many more of our students can actually attain.

This approach also ensures that those students, who do not have the academic ability to study the texts in their original form, still have a very solid foundation of Chassidic knowledge and values to take with them for the rest of their lives. They have a positive feeling toward Chassidus and value and appreciate how the Chassidic approach can enhance one's life in general and one's approach to the study of Torah and fulfillment of Mitzvos in particular.