

Rethinking Teacher Roles to Include Youth Mentoring: The Israeli Democratic Schools' Model

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Teachers' jobs normally do not provide time for mentoring students. Despite the increased emphasis on social emotional and mental health support in schools, teachers' job description remains mostly one of teaching content. This paper, based on extensive interviews with teachers who are youth mentors, students, and parents in five Israeli democratic schools, documents the advantages and challenges in reconceptualizing the role of the teacher to include youth mentoring. Results indicated that open and supportive school environment promoted mentor-mentee relationships. Second, mentoring was key in enabling student choice – a key aspect of self-directed learning. Third, mentors' role was facilitated by being provided freedom in define their role. Fourth, mentors had multiple student supportive roles including creating dialog with students, facilitating student socialization, helping student deal with teenage issues such as dating and drugs, creating academic schedule, helping mentees become engaged in school activities, and engaging student in goal setting. Another important mentors' role was being mentees' advocates in such issues as dealing with discipline issues and challenges with teachers. Mentoring also played an important role in helping students deal with trauma and isolation during the pandemic. The study suggests that teacher youth mentoring within a nurturing student-centered environment can be a promising practice in helping strengthen students' social emotional learning.

Keywords: Teachers as youth mentors, democratic schools, social emotional learning

Introduction

Teachers' jobs normally do not provide time for mentoring students. Despite the increased emphasis on social emotional and mental health support in schools, teachers' job description remains mostly one of teaching content. Hargreaves (2001) called for deemphasizing teachers' role as content instructors and recommended that schools should help teachers "develop and exercise their emotional competence of caring for...children" (p. 1077). Shapiro (2013) suggested that youth mentoring benefits school attendance, achievement, graduation, workforce readiness, and community connection. However, only 5% of US youth receive mentoring programs (Raposa et al., 2017). Research shows that mentoring programs embedded in schools and conducted by teachers were most effective (Cloth et al., 2023; Rhodes, 2020). For example, Converse and Lignugaris-Kraft (2018) found that school-based mentoring substantially increased student school connectedness. Indeed, teacher-student relationship is a key factor in affecting various learners' outcomes such as student grades, classroom behavior, participation in school activities, and school engagement (Quin, 2017).

One important aspect that affects teacher-student relationship is the school's hierarchical

setting and student agency. Yoon and Rönnlund (2021) examined control and agency in student-teacher relationships in Finish and Korean schools and concluded that most students felt their agency was limited in most aspects of school life and did not have a say in decision making.

Literature Review

Democratic education is a form of progressive education that has become prevalent in the past 30 years around the world (Gray, 2017). Based on a survey of experts and practitioners, Korkmaz & Erden (2014) described the following characteristics of democratic schools including equal participation in decision making, relationship based on transparency, respect, responsibility, and collaboration, and learner-centered practices

Israel, one of the leading countries in establishing democratic schools, has created approximately 40 publicly funded democratic schools since the 1980s. This movement started because of the dissatisfaction with public mainstream education (Hecht & Ram, 2008). While all democratic schools are based on the belief that children should choose their own classes and are not required to attend class and that all major school decisions are done through democratic deliberations through committees and general assembly, the unique

aspect of Israeli democratic schools is that all students are provided teacher-student mentoring. Hence, all students in Israeli democratic schools select a mentor from a list of school mentors who are full time teachers and staff and engage with them in a periodic dialogue (Hect & Ram, 2008).

While mentoring or advisory programs have been used in the past, especially in middle schools, Gambone (2024) recommended that researchers should seek various progressive schools with “schoolwide commitment to cultivating trust and relationships...which could provide valuable comparison data (p. 59).” Gambone (2024) further recommended that research should focus on “identifying school level characteristics that foster (teacher-student, author) relationships and increase our understanding how it operates” (p. 59). It is therefore of interest to explore the nature and roles that teachers engage in as youth mentors and its impact on students, parents and staff in these schools. It is anticipated that students’ social and emotional needs as well as school connectedness and engagement would be enhanced through mentoring.

Method

The researcher visited five Democratic schools in Israel in 2018 and in 2022. Four of the schools were PreK-12 grade, and one was 7-12 grade. The schools were relatively small schools having between 300-500 students and existing between 18 to 38 years with an average age of 25. All visits included an hour-long interview with the principal and a tour of the grounds. The visits included interviews with mentors (a few were not teachers but staff with additional responsibilities) and students and parents were interviewed on zoom due to scheduling challenges. Overall, 6 principals, 22 mentors, 30 students, and 6 parents participated. Interview questions attempted to elicit information about the nature of mentoring in the schools, the advantages as well and the challenges involved, and the impact mentoring had on school participants. In addition to school visitations, data was collected from a mentoring workshop with 30 teachers from various democratic schools. The data, including field notes and interview transcripts, were compiled, transcribed, and translated to English. For analytic purposes, the researcher initially created codes from each data source searching participants’ reactions to and comments about their interactions with their mentor or mentee. More specifically using Grounded Theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967), the researcher conducted line-by-line analysis of the logged field notes and interview transcripts to generate the codes for each set of data and created a list of codes. The codes were then grouped into themes using constant comparison method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Results

Open and supportive school environment

promoted mentor-mentee relationships. The climate of the democratic schools played a key role in promoting close mentor-mentee relations. The schools’ climate was informal where students were given time to play, socialize and express themselves. The status of democratic schools as unique public schools but also partially private allowed them more flexibility. Indeed, a mentoring coordinator noted, “On my first day at the school, it seemed to me like a circus – everyone is happy... it looked like a summer camp not a school.” An important common theme in all schools was the opportunities for outdoor play. Children of all ages could spend large amount of uninterrupted time in play. Beyond play, the schools provided a variety of opportunities for students to engage across age groups in outdoor activities such as care taking of animals and designing outdoor toys and gadgets.

In addition to outdoor opportunities, democratic schools typically provided grade level homerooms – spaces where students socialized, decorated, and called it home. Furthermore, these spaces promoted inter-age interaction as students were grouped in a two- or three-year range multiage sections. In contrast, classrooms were used only for grade-level classes. In this way, the schools were prioritizing community and student ownership. Students also felt they had opportunities to contribute to the school’s community. For example, an 11th grader shared how he organized a week-long hiking for students and faculty. Furthermore, the schools were also attuned to students’ interests such as arranging for students to study Chinese.

Teachers and staff also felt part of the school’s community. Teachers indicated they had a relaxed environment where they were treated as professionals. Classroom teaching did not emphasize content coverage rather than the process of learning as one teacher described, “We are much less in a hurry here. As a teacher I don’t rush all the time to finish the material.” Assessment also supported a non-hierarchical and conducive environment using “feedback for growth.” Democratic schools provided narrative feedback to students (instead of grades and test scores) based on teachers and mentors’ narratives that were discussed and shared biannually in the parent-student-mentor conferences. In addition, parents felt welcomed at the school as one parent described, “the whole school is like a family. It’s a community place, something that you no longer see in schools in Israel.” Furthermore, parents felt that the schools emphasized mental health and care and provided a space where their children wanted to be.

Student Choice and Mentoring

Student choice was one of the main pillars in promoting student self-directed learning, independence, socialization, and motivation. One mentor described the nature of student choice, “choosing what to learn, whether to learn, how to learn, who to learn with, who will be my mentor, whether I come to school or not...everything is

choice.”

Teachers believed that mentoring helped with choice to enable democracy as one mentor indicated, “a democratic school without mentoring is like a democratic state without democracy... Mentoring is necessary for democracy but it’s not enough, you also need a parliament.” For students, democracy in the schools mostly meant individual choice. A 10th grade female student noted, “The essence of democratic school is the freedom to choose.”

One of the main choices at the schools was the choice of mentors. Students were provided opportunity to list three adults/teachers who they prefer, and, in most cases, they received one of their choices. One mentor explained the significance of choice of mentor, “You choose your mentor, and you get treated not as one of a collective but as an individual.” Furthermore, the opportunity to choose a mentor contributed to mentor-mentee bonding. For example, a 2nd grader said, “You choose who you want (instead) of suddenly they impose (a mentor) on you.” Another important choice opportunity for students was whether to attend classes. One mentor explained, “While about 80% choose to attend, 20% choose not to. If they decide not to attend some classes, we (mentors) find other solutions.” A female 10th grader elaborated, “If I decide not to go to classes my mentor will talk to me...In another school if you don’t go to class, you get a punishment.”

A third important choice in democratic schools was choosing academic classes as a mentor explained, “The role of the democratic school is to maximize the child’s ability to utilize the school for his own benefit. Sometimes the child is afraid to try something (new), so the role of the mentor is to give it a try.”

Empowering Mentors

To promote student choice, democratic schools also provided substantial autonomy for mentors. A male mentor explained, “the school enables, and I love it, for each mentor to redefine his role within certain limits...Different mentors define the role differently.” One veteran mentor described how he advises new mentors, “I tell the (new) mentor to wonder in the branching trails of mentoring. Wonder in these pathways until you find your own trail...I am ready to help him finding his way with minimum injuries.”

As mentors deal with a state of uncertainty about their mentees’ choices, they often prepare to support decisions as one mentor described, “I don’t navigate the children; I don’t know exactly what the child will (choose to) do. But I am in a state of readiness to what might happen...I am here to do a little stirring if needed or to offer different possibilities.”

Mentoring Roles in Supporting Students

Mentors’ role in democratic schools included multiple functions – it included creating dialog and providing emotional and social support,

helping with problem solving, academic advising, and advocacy. A 5th grader shared, “I think that the mentor is very important for me - he helps me sign up for classes; he helps me a lot with many problems...It you are sad, you could unload (on him) and this is fun that you have someone to laugh with.” Mentors provided rich description of their functions and explained how it was different than their teaching function, “My role is to create a dialog, create intimacy, and be an address that is not a teacher. A teacher has a different role...The moment I sit with my mentee, I am his mentor not his teacher.”

Creating a dialog required mentors to be non-judgmental, create an inviting space for dialog, mirror to their mentees concerns, and focus on issues their mentees cared about. Creating dialog space enabled mentors to provide emotional support for students who often experienced personal and family issues by providing a safe space and confidentiality. One parent explained that importance, “(Overall) my (children’s) feeling is that there is someone for them. This is what one of my children said - ‘I feel protected.’

Mentors also played a key role in addressing socialization issues facing students. They often monitored how their mentees were functioning socially as one mentoring coordinator explained, “We look at social skills and social connections. To what extent the child is flexible and fulfill various roles in his in-group? How he is able to self-control? Physical and emotional control are extremely important.” Teenage students often tended to confide with their mentors about issues that concerned them such as dating, drugs, and alcohol consumption, and managing conflict. One student shared how his mentor modeled to him how to manage conflict, “I got to learn a lot from my mentors such as how to behave in certain situations... When there is a conflict between friends, I learned (from my mentors) to take a distant perspective.”

Since students in democratic schools chose their own academic schedule, an important role mentors had was to function as academic advisors. Mentors helped their mentees explore their interests, engage in school programs, enroll in courses, and find means to make their interest reality. For example, one mother shared how the mentor engaged her son in the school’s hiking program, “My son was very much connected to hiking and trips...Knowing that, his mentor told him, ‘Listen, we are organizing a class trip, and I want you to be a leading organizer.” Another parent described how her son’s mentor helped him persist academically despite difficulties, “Initially he chose to take advance Arabic and advance math but then he wanted to drop it. So, his mentor insisted he not give up and she also kept in touch with his Arabic and math teachers.”

Beyond engaging students in school programs, mentors helped their mentees reflect on their program and set future goals. A mentoring coordinator described the role of the mentor in goal setting, “interview children and ask them

about goals they want to set for themselves... things they had difficulty in, and what were their challenges.”

Lastly, an important role of the mentors was to advocate for their mentees. An important area for advocacy was in helping students with school discipline issues. In democratic schools, discipline issues were resolved in a discipline committee where elected children and adults served to address and resolve discipline. One 9th grader described how his mentor helped resolve an unfair punishment he received from the committee, “they punished me by prohibiting me from playing outdoors for three weeks. This was super exaggerated (punishment). So, I went to my mentor, and she told them, ‘Hey, it’s not fair.’ I ended up writing an apology.” Mentors also advocated for their mentees vis-à-vis other teachers as a 7th grader explained, “When I have a problem in classes, my mentor talks with the (relevant) teacher, or he tells me to go and talk to the teacher.” Finally, mentors’ role was to advocate for and a liaison between their mentees and parents. For example, one mother described how her daughter’s mentor helped her as a parent “to be updated about my child, and to learn things (about my child) I normally don’t hear about day-to-day – (things) that help me promote my child’s interests.”

Mentoring and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a huge challenge to all schools and families as students and their parents often remained isolated at home for lengthy periods of time. Similarly, teachers had to work from home while caring for their own families. Exploring how students and teachers continued school involvement and mentoring in remote, represented a unique opportunity to shed new light on the resiliency and influence of mentoring. As the pandemic progressed, students found themselves isolated at home and many found mentoring as a lifeline. One male 7th grader, acknowledged, “I had the mentor when I needed someone close. She simply was there (for me).” Similarly, a mother of three, described “The mentors were the first ones to reach out and connect (with my children). They instigated a zoom meeting once a week. They checked what was going on in the family.” A male 11th grader, characterized his mentoring sessions during the pandemic as therapy and a way to rest from tiring remote learning,

While mentoring helped many students survive the pandemic it also faced many challenges. The lack of physical connection and the reliance on technology to communicate during mentoring conversations often resulted in superficial or repetitive dialogs as a 9th grader noted, “the truth is that there was distancing, and it was very, very hard.” Furthermore, there was a lack of consistent mentor-mentee contact that resulted in some students being left out as a male mentor, recounted, “(For) a third (of the students) we were successful in keeping mentor-mentee connection...;

(for) another third, it was a stuck connection...not flowing...; and a third did not respond (at all).”

Like students, mentors found the lack of physical contact a challenge. Mentors found themselves overwhelmed with time demands as a female vice principal, described, “During the Corona, the time limits (on mentoring) were broken. We would communicate on zoom or in the park or in a variety of ways, and I sometimes had to make up excuses to leave...after all I had life too.”

The challenges and difficulties in maintaining mentoring connections, however, enabled mentors to gain new understanding of mentoring. First, it became apparent that prior in-depth connection with mentees was instrumental to a more effective remote mentoring. Students, new to the schools who have not had the time to establish close connections to their mentors, struggled in maintaining productive mentoring relationships. Second, continuous mentorship during the pandemic enabled students to more quickly recover academically and socially when they came back to in-person schooling. Third, mentors found new ways to substitute for the reliance on face-to-face mentoring using email, zoom, phone, texting, and WhatsApp groups combining with infrequent individual home visits. Fourth, mentors discovered that some students who normally were hard to reach at school could be better connected through remote technology.

Conclusions and Implications

After reviewing what schools do to implement Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in both the US and Spain, Billy and Garriguez (2021) recommended that teachers should teach their student five competencies – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. This study shows how teacher youth mentoring role promoted many of these competencies. However, Lustik and Ota (2021) found that teachers needed more time and support to implement SEL practices. Designating teacher role as mentor provides that essential time to focus on the affective needs of students. As this study shows establishing and supporting the teachers’ role as youth mentors has an enormous benefit to students. Given that strong teacher-student relationship is key to students’ engagement and reduction of loneliness in schools (Quin, 2017; Zheng et al. 2024) teacher youth mentoring is a worthwhile endeavor. Furthermore, as this study documents, during crises like the pandemic, youth mentoring provides much needed support to students facing isolation and trauma.

However, supporting teachers as youth mentors is a complex undertaking that requires, as this study shows, creating an inviting and inclusive school environment where all have a voice in individual and school affairs. Furthermore, student choice makes mentoring more meaningful as mentors guide students to make more thoughtful decisions. Student choice was found to be a major factor in promoting student motivation (Koca,

2016; Simmons & Page, 2010). In conclusion, while the role of teachers as mentors is a promising practice that has a potential to substantially improve SEL it would require schools to establish more student-centered practices and an elaborate system of support for both students and staff.

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