

# Reviews / Comptes rendus

## Teachers as Mentors: Models for Promoting Achievement with Disadvantaged and Underrepresented Students by Creating Community

by Aram Ayalon

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Aram Ayalon's *Teachers as Mentors* examines in depth the role of teachers as mentors/advisors over a 15-year period at Kedma School in Jerusalem, Israel, and Fenway High School in Boston, Massachusetts. East and West are two solitudes no more as they meet to compare challenges faced, barriers overcome, strategies and techniques tried and tested, and lessons learned in the process of designing, developing, and implementing mentoring/advisory programs within their respective schools for disadvantaged and underrepresented students.

The book is structured in five parts. Part 1, "Establishing Nurturing Schools," provides the context, literature review, and rationale for using teacher mentors as a strategy to reach youth at risk and prevent student dropout. It underscores a learner-centred model, aimed at social and emotional learning, to enhance learners' ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and doing/behaving to achieve important life lessons/tasks. The model stresses students' motivation to learn and the value of building positive personal relationships and meaningful connections between students and teachers—as youth mentors/advisors who enhance students' social capital through caring and nurturing in small-school environments. The subsequent small learning communities foster student engagement and bonding, which are critical to successful student development, retention, and high academic achievement. Mentors/advisors nurture, support, care, and/or advocate for students; discuss with students their social, personal, and academic concerns; and work with parents to increase their support for their children's education.

Part 2, "Mentoring Classes," elaborates on the advantages and disadvantages, similarities, and differences of the mentoring classes at both schools, including the curriculum and related activities; expands on teachers' and students' experiences through their own words; and explains how mentoring contributes to a caring and nurturing learning environment. Both schools integrated learner-centred activities and curriculums at lower- and upper-grade levels. Examples of this approach at Kedma included establishing a community of learners, becoming better acquainted with each other, learning good study habits, and building a school identity. These activities furthermore integrated students' real-life concerns into the coursework, including

social, developmental, and emotional issues. Upper-grade mentoring classes built on the themes of belonging, gender differences, equity, goal setting, identity, and helping and preparing learners to succeed in their final/matriculation examinations. Similarly, at Fenway, examples related to enhancing students' responsibility and relationships with peers and teachers, team and community building through discussion circles, and cooperative learning and team-building exercises. Academic skills, including critical thinking skills, were also emphasized.

Part 3, "Individual Teacher-Student Relationships," expands on the relationships among mentors, students, and their families at both schools, arguing that strong teacher-student relationships and connections comprise necessary conditions for retention and academic and social successes of minority and poor students. These bonds enhance students' social capital, build a more learner-centred learning environment, support social-emotional learning, and develop learners' intellectual engagement. Successful mentoring programs are measured by the strength of mentor-student relationships; that is, the stronger the relationships, the more likely students are to succeed socially and academically. The mentors' main role was to support students through forming close relationships with students and families, hold regular informal meetings with in-depth dialogues, advocate for students, and provide continuous supervision.

Part 4, "Mentor Support Systems," highlights the new role for teachers as youth mentors and details the support systems required for a sustainable and viable youth-mentoring system. Critical system elements at both schools included increased paid contact time with students; the centrality and importance of mentors' roles, mentoring forums, co-mentoring/advising, support, and/or guidance (i.e., mental health, psychological counseling) for mentors; and school-based psychological intervention. At Fenway, additional elements included professional development and the creation of a school climate that celebrated students.

There were significant differences between Kedma and Fenway in both the control given to mentors and the mental health support provided. At Kedma, mentors were considered part of the leadership team and wielded significant power in the decision-making process related to student dismissal, scheduling, and curriculum. In contrast, Fenway's mentors felt isolated and were unaware of what their colleagues were doing. The nature of support differed at both schools. Kedma focused on helping mentors develop professionally, and relevant support to students was provided through outside professionals, including psychologists and facilitators. At Fenway, conversely, in-house guidance counselors provided the main support.

The book's final section, "Summary and Implications," identifies the benefits for students, teachers, mentors, and schools and offers guidelines for establishing mentoring programs. Guidelines recommend creating a program through joint discourse and dialogue; leadership, vision, and commitment; removing and overcoming barriers; staff development; distributed leadership and participatory decision making; nurturing school environment; and learner-centred curriculums. Barriers to be addressed include crowded curriculums, resource limitations, policy barriers, large school size, and lack of teacher preparation.

This easy-to-read book provides an overview of related research in the field, an extensive reference list, examples of successful mentoring activities used, and pitfalls to avoid in developing mentoring relationships and programs. It will be of interest to students, practitioners, researchers, teachers in K-12, and those who are interested in mentoring as a strategy for helping all types of learners, colleagues, and peers at all levels of the educational systems, including the business community. More specifically, those working with at-risk learners or disadvantaged learners will find this book useful. The many lessons learned from designing, developing, and implementing the mentoring systems at both schools, and the success stories portrayed through the actual words of participants provide a roadmap for those who are interested in developing mentoring relationships and systems. Novice and experienced participants in mentoring

relationships will take away many lessons from these twin stories. Research on successful teacher mentor models and their positive impact on urban, minority, and at-risk students has been lacking; *Teachers as Mentors: Models for Promoting Achievement with Disadvantaged and Underrepresented Students by Creating Community* fills that gap.

Reviewed by Atlanta Sloane-Seale, University of Manitoba