Agility and Flexibility:
Key Aspects for Pedagogical Mentoring in the Age of COVID-19 Crisis

Orit Broza, Michaella Kadury-Slezak, Liat Biberman-Shalev, Dorit Patkin
Levinsky College of Education
Israel

Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, both academic institutions and schools have implemented the distance teaching-learning. Consequently, the academic stuffs' role as mediators has required re-organization and adjustment to the new situation. This article presents a case study of a sciences pedagogical mentor in the training program for primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. By conducting a qualitative method, the research aim is to characterize the perceptions, values and considerations that have directed the mentor throughout the crisis, focusing on agile mindset. Research instruments were: (a) a field diary of the pedagogical mentor. It contained thoughts, documentation of talks with the training/tutoring teachers and with the students, as well as documented observations of the students during the COVID-19 crisis; and (b) the students' documentations throughout the COVID-19 crisis, including writing in a blog, writing in a forum, planning lessons, and reflecting on the teaching-learning process. Data analysis was based on the documentations of the mentor and the students. Findings illustrated that the mentor served as modelling to the students as her perception of the situation and her actions affected their practicum and conduct, as demonstrated later on. The central axis that guided the mentor was her professional identity and that of the students. In addition, the main approach that underpinned her mentoring during this period was agile mindset, namely a rapid adjustment to changes with promptness and agility.

1. Introduction

Pedagogical mentors are key figures in teacher education and a considerable part of their role constitutes the mediation between the training institution (the academia) and school. During the COVID-19 crisis, both the training institution and the schools have implemented the distance teaching-learning. Consequently, the mentors' role as mediators has required re-organization and adjustment to the new situation. At the normal run of things, the relation with the school is organized and known in advance. The reality of crisis has undermined the logistic aspect of the partnership with the school, since schools have been closed and the studies are conducted by virtual and distance learning. All the mentors in the primary school training program have been requested to adjust the partnership and training to the new space. Hence, the training team has raised many questions concerning the distance training at a time of crisis. For example, how can we assist our training partners in the pedagogical aspects of distance teaching-learning? How can we help the pre-service teachers [hereinafter – "students"] in developing mental and emotional resilience in situations of uncertainty?

This article presents a case study of a sciences pedagogical mentor in the training program for primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The research aim is to characterize the perceptions, values and considerations that have directed the mentor throughout the crisis, focusing on agile mindset. Furthermore, we will explore the implications of the mentor's actions for the students' conduct and perceptions in the face of a crisis-based reality.

2. Literature Review

The main challenge of the education system in the 21st century is shaping and intensifying the extent of relevance in two key aspects. The first aspect is our dramatically and rapidly changing life reality, without an ability to predict the future reality. This implies that the education system should adapt itself to the challenges of this changing reality and develop the learners' awareness, features and skills, so that they act in an optimal manner [1]. The second aspect is the principle of personalized learning. That is, adjusting the teaching to the learners' unique features so that they can actualize themselves according to their capabilities and aspirations [2].

2.1. The role of pedagogical mentors

Prevalent definition of pedagogical mentors in the literature relates to mediators between theory and practice and between practicum at school and the training institution [3]. Through the mediation, the mentors assist students in shaping their professional identity as future teachers, as well as in acquiring teaching competences that teachers need. In addition to the professional aspects, the mentors' role consists

in helping students with socio-emotional aspects. In fact, pedagogical mentors serve as an educator's figure that helps students in developing personal resilience for learning from success, coping with failures and knowing to function in situations of uncertainty [4].

Another major aspect of pedagogical mentors' role is demonstrated by the promotion and reinforcement of the partnerships with the training schools. Within the framework of this partnership, the mentors maintain a close relationship with the principal, training teachers and additional staff members. The objective is to form a learning community, a space for practical inquiry, materialization of a reflective discourse and the building and implementation of instruments for assessing the learners [5].

The COVID-19 crisis had entailed a situation, whereby the relationship with the school shifted to the virtual space. The country was in a state of complete lockdown, causing uncertainty as far as its duration was concerned. Many questions were raised with respect of teacher education, such as: Does this concern a short-term or long-term event? How to implement distance learning and train teachers for that? How to assist students in establishing from a distance the relationship and communication with the learners and the training teachers? Should the students establish relationships also with the learners' parents? The pedagogical mentors were required to respond to this change through shared thinking with the staff of the school as well as with colleague mentors, head of the primary school pathway, head of the department of teaching and the dean of the faculty of the academic institution.

3. Research context

This study relates to the practicum of students in primary schools during the period of the COVID-19 crisis. Immediately upon the onset of the crisis, the teaching in the schools changed from 'face-to-face' to distance teaching following a lockdown in the country. The schools had to deal with the need to check whether the pupils had computers and cellular devices at home, as well as with the way of maintaining the personal contact with the pupils. The mentor and the students were involved in the thinking and examination process together with the school teachers. The students' communication with the young pupils were mostly through the parents with the collaboration of the home-class teacher. The communication with the older pupils was done directly with the mediation of the home-class teacher.

It became necessary to adjust the learning contents to the distance learning. This required joint thinking of the school teachers, the pedagogical mentor and the students as part of the partnership processes. After a period of lockdown that lasted about a month, the pupils returned to school and both the mentor and students were also asked to come back to the school. However, since some of the students were considered as being at risk, the pedagogical mentor had to think together with the school staff how to provide a response to the students so that they did not sustain any damage to their training.

4. Methodology

This is interpretive-qualitative research [6] of a case study type that is frequently used as exploratory observation for getting initially acquainted with the phenomenon [7]. This research method has been chosen since it allows a thorough exposure of the narrative of one participant in times of crisis. Moreover, it characterizes the perceptions, values, and considerations that have guided the participant, in order to learn from this case and investigate a larger population later.

The research participants were a pedagogical mentor of sciences teaching and nine female students under her supervision. The students were in the 2nd and 3rd year of their studies and their practicum took place in two primary schools at the center of the country. All of them gave their consent to participate in the study, their identity was kept confidential and they were given fictitious names in the data analysis.

The data were collected by a variety of instruments in order to give researchers different perspectives on the investigated phenomenon. The research instruments were: (a) a field diary of the pedagogical mentor. It contained thoughts, documentation of talks with the training/tutoring teachers and with the students, as well as documented observations of the students during the COVID-19 crisis; and (b) the students' documentations throughout the COVID-19 crisis, including writing in a blog, writing in a forum, planning lessons, and reflecting on the teaching-learning process. They also included a summarizing work of the practicum inquiry course that accompanied the practicum in the schools. Data analysis was based on the documentations of the mentor and the students. Thematic content analysis was performed bottom up.

5. Findings

Findings illustrated that the mentor served as modelling to the students as her perception of the situation and her actions affected their practicum and conduct, as demonstrated later on. The central axis that guided the mentor was her professional identity and that of the students. The first question the mentor asked herself already on the first days of the

education system shutdown was: "Who am I as a pedagogical mentor during the COVID-19 crisis and what values are guiding me?"

Educational approaches underpinned her mentoring during this period. The first approach was agile mindset, namely a rapid adjustment to changes with promptness and agility. The second approach was a personally-adapted mentoring, when the mentoring boundaries were broken and different models of practicum were designed in accordance with the needs of the students and the school. This section presents the findings in line with the first approach. The findings encompassed an identification and conceptualization of the mentor's actions, obtained from the content analysis.

As indicated, during the COVID-19 crisis, teaching at school has changed from 'face-to-face' to distance teaching following the lockdown in the country. Excerpts from the mentor's diary at the beginning of the crisis attested to her quick reaction to each of these situations, attributing importance to the continuous contact with the students and with the training/tutoring teachers due to the physical distancing:

"The schools were closed, transition to distance learning, do not know for how long… but the feeling is of uncertainty. Hence, it is already important to conduct immediately personal conversations with the students and, at the same time, with the teachers" (March, 2020).

When the mentor realized that the lockdown would last for a long time, she did not linger and scheduled immediately a zoom meeting with the students in order to discuss the situation. She conducted an emotional and pedagogical discourse associated with their professional identity in a period of uncertainty, examining their values, i.e., what is important and what is less important? What needs to be adjusted to this period? Moreover, she provided instruments that suited the learners and the spirit of the period. It was no longer possible to continue teaching in the conventional way since the learners were at home and it was necessary to engage them. This is demonstrated by the following excerpt from the field diary:

"It is essential that I dedicate time to the shaping of the professional identity, who I am as a distance learning sciences teacher. We should talk about the difficulties, about the apprehensions… It is important to give the students anchors, practical instruments, and mainly to stimulate the thinking, raise questions…" (April, 2020).

This excerpt illustrated that the mentor persevered in emphasizing the disciplinary aspect in addition to the educational aspect. This attested to the importance of the disciplinary expertise in the perception of teachers' professional identity during the training process. The mentor's professional identity is like an anchor, and she transferred it also to the students.

In compliance with the empirical literature [8], two key components of the pedagogical mentor's role were manifested here. The first component was maintaining a personal contact and the students' mental resilience. This was due to the very fact that the continuous practicum constituted an anchor for the mentor and her students as part of the modeling of the teachers' role. The second component was maintaining the contact with the school and the wish to assist in the transition to distance learning by virtue of the partnership with the school.

The students' diaries supported this point, indicating that they had understood the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for their practicum as well as the need for adjustment to the new situation. Student 'R' wrote: *"The Corona virus brought into our life a new reality, whereby we have all been required to adjust ourselves to the new situation…"*. Consequently, the students re-thought about the practicum contents and the teaching methods, developing the pupils' thinking and nurturing their creativity being prominent. These were the words of student 'S': *"*

The assignments that I give the pupils are connected both to sciences and to education. It is first and foremost important that they continue their activities and prepare products that require the development of thinking and creativity…".

The mentor's agile mindset was accompanied by a positive perception of the situation, maintaining an interpersonal relationship with both the students and the training teachers, and tightening the relations between the training partners (student – teacher – mentor). Moreover, the mentor prioritized the scientific contents and adjustment of the distance teaching activities developed by the students. When it became clear that the situation was not temporary, requiring mental resilience for a long time, she related to the situation with optimism, and this was the message she transmitted to the students.

Mentor:

"…we thought this was a temporary situation. Then, we realized that we had to get organized for a prolonged period of distance teaching, get mobilized for that. There was a feeling of renewal, of a positive change. This was my message to the students who had the privilege of being part of the process" (April, 2020).

The mentor continued engaging in her ability to implement the change over a long period of time, expressing a feeling of renewal, of a positive change.

Nevertheless, she was constantly preoccupied with the impact of the change on the learners' emotional aspect . She reinforced the students, emphasizing that they were privileged to be part of the positive change.

The students too understood they had to change their attitude and welcome the change. Student 'N' pointed out her perception of the situation:

"Eventually, I understood that I could not control the transpiring changes and that no one was to blame. I therefore decided with myself to stop, change the attitude and use it as a teaching experience. After making this decision, I also enjoyed the changes and the opportunities to experience with several different age groups".

At the end of the lockdown period, the pupils returned to school. However, some of the students could not teach because they were at health risk and it was necessary to find an optimal solution that would allow maintaining an appropriate academic level of the practicum. The solution related both to the discipline teaching and to the physical distancing (logistics). As far as the discipline teaching was concerned, the pedagogical mentor comprehended that it was vital to continue nurturing the scientific thinking in the newly created context, "maintain thinking strategies of the highest order and scientific literacy", as well as active learning. As for the physical distancing (logistics), when the pupils and the teachers were at school and the students were at home, the mentor believed this was possible. She thought together with the teachers about immediate creative solutions and wrote in her field diary:

"The school resumed its activity, the students used distance teaching – conversations with the teachers, thinking about ways and options and building a lesson timetable for each of the students. I feel that 'anything is possible' but we must be creative, open, flexible and think outside the box" (May, 2020).

The mentor kept on thinking about logistic matters – building a lesson timetable for each student and constantly engaged in shared thinking with the training teachers regarding solutions for the students in light of the situation.

To sum up, we demonstrated the principle of agile mindset, changing the attitude as well as the mentor's rapid and positive reaction. This facilitated the growth of the students and expansion of the professional identity of the mentor and the students from the perspective of distance learning and coping with states of uncertainty. Establishing the personal relationship from a distance, building relationships of trust and confidence, as well as maintaining partnership relationships with the students and the training/tutoring teachers, have all made this possible. They enabled a safe space for shared thinking about an alternative solution for a 'face-to-face' teaching.

6. References

[1] Galés, N. L., & Gallon, R. (2019). Educational Agility. In M. Kowalczuk-Walędziak, A. Korzeniecka-Bondar, W. Danilewicz, & G. Lauwers (Eds.), *Rethinking Teacher Education for the 21st Century* (pp. 98- 110). Oplade, Berlin and Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich publishers.

[2] Zhang, L, Basham, J. D., & Yang, S. (2020). Understanding the implementation of Personalized learning: A research synthesis. *Educational Research Review*, *31*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100339

[3] Ong'ondo, C. O., & Jwan, J. O. (2009). Research on student teacher learning, collaboration and supervision during the practicum: A literature review. *Educational Research and Review*, *4*(11), 515-524.

[4] Awaya, A., McEwan, H., Heyler, D., Linsky, S., Lum, D., & Wakukawa, P. (2003). Mentoring as a Journey. *Teaching and Teacher Education 19,* 45–56.

[5] Williams, J. (2013). Boundary crossing and working in the Third Space: Implications for a teacher educator's identity and practice. S*tudying Teacher Education*, *9*(2), 118-129.

[6] Glazer, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

[7] Stake, R. E. (1994). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 236-247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.