The effect of peer-mentoring on mentors themselves: a case study of college students

# Introduction

In the transition to higher education, students face many challenges while juggling multiple demands (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat,2004). They encounter obstacles such as dealing with a new school environment (such as newlearning styles, class schedules) requiring academic, social, and organizational adaptation; monetary problems; social problems; and homesickness. The challenges are often exacerbated for students with special needs (Madaus, 2005). The term ‘special needs’ refers to any student who is formally diagnosed with either physical, emotional, and/or learning disabilities (Bryant, Brynat & Smith 2017).

 The number of students with disabilities attending higher education has been soaring in the last decade (Yssel, Pak & Beilke, 2016). Institutions of higher education have taken different measures in order to make the learning environment more accessible and thus create a smoother inclusion of these students in their institutions, (Schreuer & Sachs2014). Standard care includes services provided by institutions’ support centers (Schreuer & Sachs2014). Such as scholarships, assistive technologies, accessible campus environment, emotional support, and various workshops (Schreuer & Sachs2014). Despite these measures, students with special needs still face a higher risk of failing or of not completing their studies (Walker, 2016).

Ashkelon Academic College, like other academic institutions in Israel, runs a support centre for students with social, emotional, physical and learning disabilities. Traditional intervention programs in the center are based on providing the assistance in the form of assistive technologies, private tutoring, meetings with counsellors, and workshops. Although the support provided benefited these students academically, and enabled them to better cope with the demands of academic studies, many students felt that the reliance on the support center stressed their dependency on others and their disabilities. Moreover, many students expressed lack of confidence and anxiety that extended beyond the academic sphere and into their personal and social life as well. Thus, we searched for a new approach to assisting students with special needs that would enhance students’ self-confidence and independence. The support center at Ashkelon College initiated a peer-mentoring intervention program for students with special needs. Unlike the typical mentoring programs, in this program the mentors are students with special needs who provide assistance and mentor other students with special needs. Pairing of mentors and mentees is done such that mentors’ strengths compensate for the mentees’ difficulties. Namely, students with good learning abilities are paired with students with learning disabilities. Students who are strong emotionally are paired with students with a need of emotional assistance. Mentoring takes place twice a week and includes motivational and emotional support to emotional challenges the mentees tackle, as well as learning enhancement. The mentors themselves continue to receive support from the support center.

Research on the effects of mentoring has thus far concentrated on the mentees, however only a small number of studies have examined the effect of peer-mentoring on the well-being of the mentors themselves (Einat, 2017), and none have explored the issue among mentors who are students with special needs (physical, mental, emotional needs). This paper seeks to fill this void by providing an analysis of mentors’ narratives regarding the effect of mentoring on their academic success and their emotional and psychological well-being. Specifically, the study will explore the significance of mentoring to the self-rehabilitation of the mentors by exploring their mentoring experience and its effect on their dealing with challenges and hardships in their daily lives. Since one of the researchers is the coordinator of the support center in the college, and as researchers of this project and while observing the progress of these students from the day they were admitted to College until the end of their studies, we witnessed the students’ personal transformation and improvement in different areas in life. Thus, the study attempts to suggest mentoring as an additional therapeutic tool when working with students with special needs.

# Literature Review

***Theoretical Background***

Even as the number of students with special needs who are admitted to institutions of higher education rises, the retention rates of these students is relatively lower than that of students without disabilities (Walker, 2016). This is not surprising since students with special needs have to cope not only with the challenges of academia, but with the difficulties that their disabilities add. One way to achieve better retention rates among these students is to improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy by using peer-mentoring, an intervention based on the premise that non-professionals are better suited to provide emotional and/or instrumental support to others who share a similar predicament (Roberts & Rappaport, 1989). Most research regarding mentoring has focused thus far on student mentees (Glaser, Hall & Halperin 2006; Clare & Aisling 2017). Few studies have attempted to examine the effects of mentoring on the mentors, especially when the mentors share a similar difficulty as that of the mentees.

## The effect of peer-mentoring on the mentors was researched among prisoners who mentored other peer-prisoners in their prisons (Einat, 2017). Mentor-prisoners who participated in this program reported an increasing ability to find a new meaning in life, greater willingness to participate in the rehabilitation process, and a better ability to connect and form relationships with the prison’s staff. The mentors felt a higher level of responsibility and empathy towards their fellow prisoners and felt that they were able to provide them with emotional support (Einat, 2017).

One theory related to the idea of peer-mentoring is Riessman’s (1965) Helper Theory. According to this theory, when a person provides help to another person with a similar predicament, the helper receives benefits, perhaps even more than the recipient does. The helper may not only improve his motivation and confidence, but also his self-efficacy in knowing that his help is required and that he is important to others. The ability to positively influence the life of another individual is a rewarding experience accompanied with a rise in the ability to connect with others, and the satisfaction in helping another (Skovholt, 1974).

The principle of the helper theory may be most beneficial to people from a low socio-economic status who are usually considered at-risk population (Riessman, 1965; Shmidt, Shummow, & Kacker, 2012). In fact, for young adults being a helper may be rehabilitative and may positively affect their self-image (Riessman, 1965). This model has been applied and found to be conducive in diverse circumstances such as in various addiction programs (Riessman, 1965; Skovholt, 1974; Salzer & Shear, 2002) and for students mentoring other students (Gartner & Riessman, 1993). However, thus far it has yet to be researched as a therapeutic tool for mentor students with special needs at a higher education institution.

People with special needs rarely view themselves as service providers for others (Brill, 1994), since they are usually on the receiving end. Programs in which students with special needs become contributors to others will make them feel more valuable, activate their social skills in communicating with others, and increase their self-esteem (Brill, 1994). Participating in such programs thus may lead them to healthier lives, both mentally and physically since they need to maintain their health in order to help others. In fact, their involvement in the learning and social aspect of the academic life might impact their retention and graduation rates (Mamiseishvili & Koch 2011).

Focusing on the strengths and positive aspects of mentors as well as their capacity to contribute to others is a major building block of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002).The model of positive psychology is based on the premise that in order to achieve happiness, one should focuson creating positive emotions, strengthening personal capabilities and creating meaning in life (directing the person to use his strengths and abilities for a valuable contribution) (Seligman, 2002). Happiness is also based on involvement in life (creating a daily schedule and priorities directed to increasing the involvement in different significant and valuable aspects (such as relationships)) (Seligman, 2002). According to Seligman (2002), focusing on one’s strengths rather than on the weaknesses empowers individuals and allows them to create a positive rapport between themselves and their surroundings. The mentor student is not seen as a “problematic” student, but as a person who contributes to society. Being aware of his/her strengths and positive sides will empower the student and make him/her feel more positive and motivated towards life. Thus, in the current project we employed the model of positive psychotherapy as well as the helper theory to create as a therapeutic tool for empowering the students who were used to be receivers of help due to their disabilities.

***Methodology***

*Research procedure*

When studying the experience of people with special needs, qualitative methods are frequently used. These methods provide a closer look into the intricacies of the disabilities and the life experiences of these people in a social context. A case study, a research design used for studying a phenomenon systematically, allows the researcher to make inferences about the individual’s perceptions and interpretations based on personal stories (Tzabar, 2001). Case studies offer the subjects’ personal motivation that guides their actions and behavior (Stake, 2000), illuminates our understanding of the specific phenomenon under investigation, and allows us to make generalizations on human behavior (Tzabar, 2001). The case study provides a rich, vivid and detailed description of the case and its context (Patton, 2002).

Interviews can be used as a qualitative research technique that uses a relatively small number of respondents that describe their attitudes and beliefs regarding a particular program or situation. Interviews examine phenomena in their natural settings and provide the interpretations and the meanings people attribute to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks all participants the same questions that cover different topics in order to facilitate data analysis (Gaskel 2011). The interviewer may also ask for elaborations or clarifications when misunderstanding arise (Einat & Chen 2012). This flexibility contributes to the credibility of the data gained through the interview (Einat & Chen 2012). Interviews employ a phenomenological approach by which the researcher remains true to the source and the personal perspectives of the respondents (Welman and Kruger, 1999) while avoiding preconceived attitudes (Groenewald, 2004).

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and included the following questions:

* What is your life story / your challenges/ difficulties in life?
* Can you tell me about your academic experience before becoming a mentor?
* What is mentoring all about? How does mentoring affect your emotional and psychological well-being?
* Does mentoring affect other areas of your life?
* Do you think that mentoring has changed the course of your life?
* Do you think that mentoring will impact your future life?
* Do you think that the role of mentor makes you feel more confident?

The interviews were held on campus or in a place convenient for the student. Prior to the interview, the interviewer informed interviewees about the recording and transcription of the interview and the interviewees were asked to sign a consent form to show their willingness to take part in the study. The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed for thematic categories.

*Research population*

The study includes (*n*=17) second and third year undergraduate students with special needs (6 males;11 females) who study in various departments and receive support from the Support Center in an Academic College and are themselves mentees in a mentoring program. Since the end goal of the peer-mentoring is to use mentoring as a therapeutic tool for the mentors themselves (Reisman 1965), the participants did not take part in any other psychological therapy during the year in which they were mentors in order to eliminate any external influence over the process..

***Findings***

Three central themes emerged from the interviews. These themes correspond with the significance students give to peer-mentoring and its effect on them. The themes were: (1) self-esteem; (2) self-efficacy; and (3) empowerment.

***Theme 1: Self-esteem***

Namely, a sense of self is the subjective evaluation of a person of himself/herself, his/her thoughts, opinions and attitudes, representing feelings such as self-acceptance, personal approval and self-love, and increases as a result of self-appreciation of the individual (Adams & Gullota 1989).

Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs ([2003](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR2)) have found a positive though weak correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement. However, they noted that higher self-esteem seems to trigger higher aspirations that may entail greater academic achievements. In fact, it was found that students with a greater self- esteem have a higher college GPA and better capacity to adapt to the social and emotional changes of college (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott & Pierce,  [2012](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR1)), while students with an low self-esteem are more prone to feel disengaged from the academic experience (Zeigler-Hill et al., [2013](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-016-9485-4#CR23)).

In the present study, many of the participants explicitly referred to the boost that their work as mentors had given to their self-esteem.

J: “Mentoring has taught me how to be accountable for my actions and has developed a greater sense of responsibility in me. I used to work at a gas station, and sometimes when I didn’t feel like going to work, I just cancelled in the last minute. Now that I know there’s a child is waiting for me and is counting on me to help, I never cancel. I am accountable for my behaviour and I feel better. Now I know that if I begin a process, I need to end it. And this makes me feel good about myself... Mentoring has reinforced my self-esteem and self-confidence because I see that I am important to someone, and it gives me a boost to keep on working with that child”

Si: “I feel good about myself and I finished my studies summa cum laude. I believe that this excellence is the result of the mentoring program I was involved in for three years. Mentoring provided a certain structure. And when my day is structured, I am more efficient. I motivated them all the time and at the same time I motivated myself. When you give you receive.”

E: “the fact that I became a possible candidate to become a mentor in a program in which I was a mentee did something positive to me. It makes me feel good about myself. I feel proud. When I see my mentee started improving and getting good grades, it feels as if I am the one getting these grades…I have real satisfaction. I am accountable for her.”

O:“After I became part of the program and had to be responsible for other people, I felt a change coming and actually started to walk around the campus like everybody else. I even went to the cafeteria to buy coffee, something that never happened before since I was always treated as the physically disabled student who needed help. The moment I became a mentor, I turned from a child who kept demanding and demanding to a parent who is responsible for others”.

These accounts illustrate how the mentoring experience enabled the mentors to change from people who relied on others and were viewed by others as needy and weak, to people who are accountable not only to theirs but to others’ lives. The fact that they were finally able to believe in themselves and their abilities while accepting their disabilities was a major step in reaching self-satisfaction.

***Theme 2: Self-efficacy***

A significant finding of this study relates to the mentors’ perception of their ability, i.e. their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person’s assessment of his/her skills and competency to plan and implement the course of action required to gain a predetermined goal (Bandura, 1986). When facing challenges, students with self-efficacy find alternatives and thus tap to different emotional and cognitive abilities in order to face these situations (Bandura, 1997).

Participants in the mentoring program exhibited a considerable change in their self-efficacy. Mentors whose initial beliefs in their abilities were very low and who had low expectations regarding their capacity to succeed in life, felt once they entered the program that they were in fact capable of helping others, let alone themselves.

O: “I felt I was influencing others and I saw the positive impact from week to week, and from lesson to lesson. I saw it in the messages they sent me, in their grades that improved. That was when I realized that if I could affect others, I have the ability to do the same for myself”. “After completing my studies, I was accepted to a special program for inspectors of the IRS (income tax) which is considered very difficult.”

Indeed, O completed his studies in Economics and graduated cum laude.

Ei: “Mentoring developed my responsibility for others because I had to help my mentee hand in papers on time and be on time for our meetings.”

Ef: “My whole life I was used to receiving help from others (in school, the army, and even here in college from the support center) and this (mentoring) is the first time that I am able to give to someone. I am no longer the one who always needs help, I am able to contribute and give to others… For me it is WOW. It’s fun to be able to help somebody.”

Students also testify that the changes in their self-efficacy also had an effect in their personal lives.

J: “Before I entered the mentoring program, I had a hard time connecting with people. I used to look for jobs as private tutor that do not require facing and interacting with many people at once. Now I feel I am able to work and become part of a formal institution that addresses many people.

Si: “I personally feel that mentoring is a life changing experience. Mentoring changed me. It taught me how to be more patient, be tolerant to others, to be able to listen to others’ needs, wishes and opinions. I now understand that I can connect with others, be tolerant to their opinions and needs and this made me understand that I can connect with a spouse the same way I learnt to connect with my mentee.” “Of course there were difficult days for both of us (Si and the mentees) but it still gave me the ability to understand the right perspective in life. I had two mentees, and in addition to the hardships in their studies, they had to deal with financial problems (which I didn’t have), and if they can deal with these difficulties and still study, I can definitely be an excellent student. I have all the resources to succeed.”

D: “Mentoring gave me the ability to open up to another person. Most people see me as shy or a snob, but this isn’t really me. I am just an introvert…. The fact that I was able to teach another person gave me the experience I need in the future. But the most important thing is it taught me how to open up to others. Mentoring was a long-term process that allowed me to be open emotionally to someone and express myself. I am still not a complete extrovert, but I’m on my way. I have managed to open myself up to others and this in itself is worthwhile all the effort and involvement I put into mentoring.”

E: “It also helped me organize my time better because I knew I had to integrate many things in my life as well as in hers…People always told me I can teach well, but the fact that my mentee got high grades attested to my abilities… When she had an exam in statistics, my mentee was so scared she thought she was going to fail. Eventually she received the highest grade in class. For me, I was really proud. I walked like a peacock, like I owned the world.”

Thus, it appears that the increase in self-efficacy that the mentors gained from their experiences and the new belief they had in themselves and their abilities directly influenced the goals that they set for themselves (relationships, health and academic achievements) and the strategies they used in order to achieve these goals.

***Theme 3: Empowerment***

The third theme that arose from the accounts of the mentors was the notion of Empowerment. Empowerment is a feeling of power within the individual or the group which allows them to exercise relative control in different situations and aspects in life (Parsons, 1988; Peterson & Hughey, 2002). Two types of empowerment emerged from the study: an internal empowerment in which mentoring enabled the student to learn more about himself/herself, his/her strengths and abilities; and an external empowerment mentors received in the form of feedback from their environment, such as the mentees themselves, their parents, and the teachers.

Internal empowerment

O: “I matured. In the past I thought that I can’t give, I only need to accept. Today I know that the world needs me, and I have so much to give to others.” “When I saw that I was affecting others, it made me realize that I can make the change in my own life, to grow despite my disability.”

Si: “since I was injured, I have been living on my own relying on my handicap allowance and I got used to living this way. Through mentoring, and the close relationship I had with the mentees, I learnt to accept others’ opinions and attitudes that do not coincide with mine. Thanks to the close relationship I have had with my mentee, I realized I could develop relationship with a spouse.”

Tz: “Mentoring empowered me because I understood that I was able to use simple techniques to teach. And the mentee understood me.”

These instances demonstrate the inner power that mentoring gave the mentors. Recognizing the fact they can make a difference in other people’s lives gave them the will and strength to try to do the same for themselves.

External empowerment

N: “the mentee sends me a text message at night, to make sure I am coming to the meeting the following day. And after each meeting, the mentee sends me a thank you message. This makes me feel important. “

D: “every good grade the mentee receives, she tells me that she would have never made this grade without me. This really empowers me. Once I came to their house, and her family told me that I was really appreciated and they were really happy I was working with her. It gave me a good feeling”.

Ei: “every good grade the mentee receives makes me feel like a peacock,

Si: “I don’t expect anything…I just give. It’s like I give others and the universe or something repays you by power. You motivate others and you become stronger…So this mentoring is simply changing people. It shows you different people with different disabilities, and this gives you a better perspective of your life. I feel that every student needs to participate in a mentoring program, even for one semester.”

At the end of the mentoring program, the participants reported feeling more empowered both in their own eyes and in the eyes of their surroundings. They felt more confident to exploit their strength and abilities to achieve future goals.

In summary, findings confirmed the empowerment theory, according to which every individual has strengths and competencies that can be exercised (Giddens 1996, Saleebey; 2004). However, in order for an individual to realize his/her potential and experience success, he/she must have a positive self-perception, and a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) that not only increase his/her autonomy (Rappaport, 1984; Rappaport & Zimmerman, 1988), but also improve his/her problem solving and decision-making skills (Rappaport & Seidman 2000).

**Discussion**

This research examined the effects of mentoring among college students with special needs who are mentors to students who share similar predicaments. The main purpose was to examine the benefits the mentors derive from their work, and find out whether mentoring could serve as a therapeutic tool for students with special needs.

The effects of peer-mentoring have been an object of serious enquiry among disabled and non-disabled individuals (Einat, 2017; Brill, 1994). Benefits range from increased self-esteem and self-confidence (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998), better academic achievements (Brill, 1994; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007), improved ability in forming close personal relationships and social interactions and learning of new skills (Brill, 1994). Einat (2017) provided evidence as to the positive role of mentoring for the prisoner mentor. Through mentoring, mentor prisoners were able to discover their strength and virtues which reflected on their motivation, relationships with prison staff, and self-healing.

In line with previous research, three themes emerged from the personal accounts of the mentors. The first theme involved the positive effects of mentoring on the self-esteem of the student mentors. Mentoring enabled these students to explore their personal capabilities and strengths. Instead of taking the role of the needy and becoming dependent on the system for help, they were providing help to others.According to mentors’ testimonies, the fact that they were able to use their strengths and abilities to help others strengthened their self-esteem tremendously. In addition, changing roles from a recipient of help to someone who gives back to society and whose opinion counts elevated their self-validation and improved their motivation to keep helping their mentees. This finding is in agreement with the Helper Theory (Reisman, 1965) which emphasizes the positive effects of helping others and the positive influence on the self-image of the helper, as well as with Seligman’s (2002) theory of positive psychology that stresses the need for strengthening the patients’ unique strengths, rather than improving their weaknesses.

An additional theme that emerged from the interviews was the mentors’ improved self-efficacy. When the mentors witnessed their own success with their mentees, they started to believe in their own abilities to attain their goals in life, be it academic or personal, and to trust that they would be able to complete any task they may face in the future. Moreover, the student mentors often realized that in order to achieve their goals in life, they may have to modulate their behavior, and were willing to make an effort to change. And when reaching their goals and experiencing of success, they felt more motivated to continue this path in other challenging aspects in life such as in their scholastic capacities and in forming relationships (even with a spouse). In fact, Bandura (1997) argues that people high in self-efficacy were better able to cope with and bounce back from challenges in life. Indeed, all students in the program completed their academic studies, many reported finding a relevant job, and others even reported they were successful in forming relationships with a spouse.

Another aspect that was found to be influenced by peers-mentoring was empowerment. Mentors reflected on their internal and external empowerment as a direct consequence of their mentoring. Their service and the significance they attached to their service made them feel more powerful. Empowerment is expressed in the ability to have an impact on individual aspects (the individual’s ability to be active and to control events in one’s life using competencies and skills), the organization level (the ability to function as a member of an organization or a social network, to acquire relevant resources, to improve efficiency and to reach goals), and the community level (the ability to function as a member of a community, meaningfully engaging in community activities and focusing on the community’s needs) (Rappaport and Seidman 2000).

Indeed, the participants used their knowledge as well as their virtues and strengths to achieve a higher goal of adding value to others. In addition, receiving validation and acknowledgement from their mentees and their families was an external empowerment force that helped them view themselves as successful. When the mentors saw that their mentoring helped others, in scholastic aptitude as well as in emotional growth, they became empowered.

Since mentors had to be responsible for someone else, it motivated them to improve their own life. Mentoring allowed them to practice social communication and strengthen their social skills. Hence, participants who described themselves before entering the mentoring program as introverts, testified they were feeling more at ease communicating with others.. Mentors felt they were better equipped to confront the problems in their own lives, since they have already been solving the problems of others. When success followed, and they received acknowledgement and validation from others, it empowered them. The mentors described mentoring as the desire to pass along the great deed they received (as mentees).

Implications

These findings indicate that initiating an intervention program in which students with special needs become “service providers” and supporters may empower them, improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy and may lead them to be more responsible for themselves and for others. This intervention program may be used as a therapeutic tool for students with special needs.

Limitations

This study has two major caveats that need to be addressed in future research. The first caveat involves the population in the study. Since the study is a qualitative study, only a small number of participants were examined (n=17). A larger number of participants may provide a broader picture of the effects of mentoring on mentors, and may also illuminates other benefits. Moreover, a wider range of population might reveal a different picture. The study focused on students who were admitted to the academia. It is reasonable to assume that these students have a certain level of resilience since they were able to overcome the hurdles that their disability presented them with.

The second caveat involves the data gathering method. The study used a semi-structured interview which relies solely on the accounts of the participants. The participants may have been influenced by what they believe is expected from them and what is socially acceptable. In addition, participants were approached while they were already part of the mentoring program. Thus, any information about their attitudes toward volunteering and their motivation to help others may have been affected by the process.

Future research

Future research should examine a wider range of people who are not students. Future research might also include a mixed method of questionnaires to be used before and after mentoring.

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