Triadic mentoring in early childhood teacher education: the role of relational agency

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Abstract

Purpose – Current approaches to early childhood teacher education have moved from a view of student–teacher training as interactions involving one novice and one expert, to a process that demands resources and engagement of several professional players while mediating students' learning in practice. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of a triadic mentoring model of a university–school collaboration ("Academia–Classroom") on student teachers' (STs) learning in the context of early childhood education in Israel. Eight mentoring triads were formed in six kindergartens. Each mentoring triad was comprised of the ST, a cooperating teacher and the college supervisor. This paper focuses on three representative triads of the eight that were studied.

Design/methodology/approach – The in-depth study adopted qualitative methodology including three complementary data-collection sources: observations of the STs working with children in the kindergarten; observations and recordings of the triadic mentoring conversations following the observations; in-depth interviews with each participant in the mentoring triad. Data were analyzed using an interpretative framework developed for the study, which combined elements from Engestrom's cultural historical activity theory, Gee's building tasks and Edward's relational agency.

Findings – The research identified three major patterns of interaction operating in the mentoring triad that promoted or hindered the learning process of early childhood education students: dissonant, harmonic and argumentative. The way in which relational agency developed in the triads was found to be the most significant aspect of students' learning process.

Originality/value – The patterns of interaction identified shed light on new aspects of relational agency, thus offering additional interpretative lenses for examining how relational agency operates in ST mentored learning processes. These new identified patterns have practical implications for the design of mentoring frameworks in early childhood teacher education.

Keywords Mentoring, Teacher training

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The quality of student teachers' (STs) learning in practice during school-based training is strongly influenced by the kind of interactions and collaboration that develop between the academic institution and the school (Wilson, 2004). To this end, the work of mentors to support teacher learning in these frameworks is crucial (Orland-Barak and Yinon, 2005), and teacher educators are constantly challenged to design appropriate modes of collaboration between mentors and mentees as well as between the school and the teacher education institution. This study examined the impact of a triadic mentoring model of university–school collaboration on STs' learning in the context of early childhood education. Triadic models of supervision in practice are designed around multiple interactions between the cooperating teacher (CT), the teacher education college supervisor (CS) and the ST are commonly used in teacher preparation programs (Hart, 2018). CTs observe STs' activities in the classroom,

encourage their reflection on action and evaluate their development as future professionals (Fletcher and Barrett, 2004). CSs communicate program requirements and guidelines for evaluation and assign a final grade (Nguyen, 2009). A major challenge that CSs deal with relates directly to the burden of their workload, which can limit the number of mentoring meetings with their students. Given their limited time and infrequent visits to their students' classrooms (Fletcher and Barrett, 2004; Hobson *et al.*, 2009), they are expected to collaborate with CTs in order to establish a reflective mentoring process. The current study examined mentored ST learning in the context of a specific collaboration between an academic college of education and kindergartens, under the roof of a relatively new program applied by the Ministry of Education in Israel, the Academia–Classroom program.

Background
Mentoring in teacher education
School-based training is regarded as a core component in the preparation of prospective teachers (Everston, 1990; Desimone, 2009). Mentoring and mentored learning are integral aspects of learning to teach in practice. In the process, the mentor mediates between novices and their specific context of practice, while trying to establish a non-hierarchical and symmetrical relationship based on mutual trust and support (Nguyen, 2009; Orland-Barak, 2014). However, day-to-day internal institutional matters often create tensions between the learning goals set out by the university and those set by the school in their drive to ensure maximum student performance (Wilson, 2004). Besides the fact that the two cultures of the college and the school are very different, college teachers may perceive the practical knowledge of schoolteachers as inferior in comparison to their own theoretical knowledge. In this context, Veal and Rikard (1998) suggest the notion of "institutional triad" to describe the hierarchy whereby the university supervisor is regarded as most powerful, followed by the mentor teacher, and concluding with the ST who is seen as the least powerful member. Thus, for the university supervisor, mentor teachers and STs to successfully join forces, they must acknowledge their differences in viewpoints, world knowledge and attitudes, and negotiate their inherent power differences (Bullough and Draper, 2004) without necessarily perceiving the triad as a hierarchy.

Mentoring relationships through the lens of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and relational agency
In the context of mentoring in teacher education, Edwards (2007) stresses that learning to become a professional should be examined through useful frameworks. To this end, Engestrom's (1987) CHAT is a particularly relevant analytic framework for examining connections between individual acts, the context in which they occur and the more general activity in which the actions are located. CHAT embraces the idea of organizational learning to expand the unit of analysis of learning beyond the individual and to examine collectives and organizations as learners. At the same time, CHAT advocates pedagogical and interventionist actions to facilitate and change learning (Engestrom and Kerosuo, 2007). One of the most promising elements within CHAT for making sense of teachers' collaborative work involves the role of tools in joint learning. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1980) thinking about the influence of social experience on individual cognition, CHAT conceptualizes tools as materials or mental objects that mediate learning; that is, they both facilitate and constrain what individuals and groups of teachers do together (Levine, 2010). Applying these tools while practitioners engage with others' resources creates new forms of practice and professional capacity. This necessitates the development of relational agency (Edwards, 2005). Resonating with Engestrom's interpretation of an activity system as an open-ended learning zone, Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) further elaborate on the

concept of relational agency, stressing the ability to attune one's responses with those being made by other professionals. Exploring mentoring through the lens of relational agency stresses the nature of mentoring as a dynamic, joint activity between mentors and mentees in a particular socio-cultural context of action (Edwards, 2005). In the process, mentors and mentees use discourse to enact specific social and cultural practices while interacting with each other (Hayes, 2008). Gee's (1999) "building tasks" help reveal this discourse through the patterns of language (i.e. the form of language, its function and its context) that are exhibited in such social and cultural practices. Thus, the complex, contested and power-laden character of the relationships that develop in a mentoring triad call for the integration of two conceptual lenses: CHAT (Engestrom, 1987) and relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011), operationalized through Gee's (1999) lens of building tasks. CHAT provides a theoretical basis and a set of tools for understanding mentoring as a goal-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity. Relational agency offers a conceptual lens for examining alignments and misalignments between participants' thoughts and actions while interpreting and responding to problems of practice. These integrated frameworks grounded our investigation of what and how STs learn from mediated joint activity in a mentoring triad.

The specific cultural–historical context in which the current study takes place is related to the relatively new implementation of the program of Academia–Classroom by the Ministry of Education in Israel. The program promotes three major innovations in teacher education: a transition to "co-teaching" in classrooms, extending practice in schools to three days a week (instead of one day) in the third year of training in kindergartens and schools, and developing a triadic mentoring support system. To this end, the CS's role is broadened to spending three days a week in kindergarten and to leading group sessions on professional development for all CTs in the program. To date, 1,800 students have been trained in the Academia–Classroom program in 350 schools and kindergartens all over the country. STs practice co-teaching with qualified teachers from the school. These teachers receive adequate financial compensation for the supervision and mentoring of students. A pedagogical supervisor from the academic institute accompanies the students in the school. In addition, the academic institution offers professional development courses free of charge for schoolteachers (Ministry of Education, 2014). The selection of schools for the project was based on the reputation of the school to develop and sustain a well-established organizational culture and ethos of school leadership (Maskit and Orland-Barak, 2015).

Method

The researchers collaborated with the Academia–Classroom program implemented in conjunction with a teacher education college in Israel. Eight triads in six kindergartens, working with the same CS, participated in the study (eight students, six CTs and one CS). The study adopted three complementary data collection sources gathered by the first author: written documentations of non-participant observations of the STs working with children in the kindergarten, audio-recorded and transcribed mentoring conversations, and in-depth interviews with each participant in the mentoring triad. During the interviews, participants were asked to comment on how the mentoring triad operated to promote the ST's learning. Specifically, they were asked to relate to interpersonal relations between participants, to explain the different roles of the CS and CT within the triad as perceived by them, to discuss the challenges related to attending to agendas of two different professional and organizational environments (the teacher education college and the kindergarten) and to share any controversial issues that emerged and how these were handled in the triad.

The transcripts of the observations and the original recording of the mentoring conversations and in-depth interviews were analyzed using an interpretative framework developed for the study, which combined elements from Engestrom's CHAT with Gee's

building tasks. Specifically, two of Gee's dimensions of activity were examined: Dimension A (i.e. observations and structured note taking of what the student does, including activities or specific actions that take place), and Dimension B (i.e. audio recordings of what is being discussed in the mentoring conversations and in the in-depth interviews, and how it is being discussed) examines the triadic mentoring conversation following the activity conducted by the ST, as well as the interviews with each member of the triad. This dimension focuses on semiotic aspects of the data, that is, what counts as knowledge in conversation, what ways of knowing are appreciated and activated, and how political aspects such as status and power relations are constructed in conversation. Gee's two dimensions of activity were juxtaposed with Engestrom's CHAT framework.

The study received ethics approval from the Mofet Institute in Israel and was conducted as a post-doctoral study of the first author. Ethical protocols were followed through all stages of the study, including participants' voluntary informed consent, the use of pseudonyms and so on.

In summary, we adopted the conceptual lenses of CHAT and relational agency in order to identify the factors that promote/hinder ST learning in mentoring triads and to characterize the different levels of relational agency that unfold in the distinctive patterns of interaction that develop in triadic mentoring processes. The following research questions framed the study. What patterns of interaction characterize triadic mentoring in the context of early childhood teaching practice? How do these patterns inform the character of ST learning in mentoring triads? Table I illustrates how the data were analyzed according to the analytical framework developed for the study. The findings of the study are illustrated by detailed reference to the three mentoring triads.

Findings
Applying Edwards' notion of relational agency, researchers identified three major patterns of interaction that operated in the mentoring triad that promoted or hindered the learning process of early childhood education students: dissonant, harmonic and argumentative. Furthermore, these patterns were found to encompass different intensification levels of relational agency, specifically, Level 1: no opportunities were made available for building relational agency within the triad; Level 2: recognizing and accessing the resources that others bring; Level 3: eliciting varied interpretations to problems of practice; Level 4: negotiating and aligning thoughts and actions; and Level 5: collaborating in order to extend and transform understandings. The different levels of intensification of relational agency yielded, in Engestrom's terms, different outcomes of learning. These outcomes were found to be influenced by the type of power relationships that developed in each triad (the subject of activity), the kind of alignments created between the college and kindergarten cultures (the community) and the type of labor division that characterized the interaction among the triad members. Below we discuss the three identified patterns of interaction operating in mentoring triads, as follows: dissonant, harmonic and argumentative.

Dissonant pattern of interaction: elitist detached discourse vs supportive and advocating discourse
The dissonant pattern of interaction was characterized by the following features in the mentoring triad: asymmetrical power relations between the two professionals within the triad, discrepancy between the different cultures of college and kindergarten, hierarchic division of labor and relational agency at a third level. This pattern is evident in the triad comprised of Frida, the CS, Gal, the CT and Yulia, the ST. The lack of symmetry in the power relations between Frida and Gal is reflected in the process of recruiting students to the Academia–Classroom program. Frida is responsible for selecting suitable students for

CHAT framework	Semiotic aspects of CHAT framework	Political aspects of CHAT framework
Subject: the mentoring triad	Semiotic aspects related to the mentoring triad: illustrative example: CT: "Clearly there are differences in knowledge and experience between the student and myself, and I will point her to the direction in which I am interested"	Political aspects related to the mentoring triad: illustrative example: CS: "The student kept clinging to her own way until I had to tell her, 'now I am the supervisor.' In other words, now you need to create a change"
Mediating artifacts: theoretical and practical experience	Semiotic aspects related to theoretical and practical experience: illustrative example: CT: "When you enter the field, much of the theory dissipates"	Political aspects related to theoretical and practical experience: illustrative example CS: "College demands are from the ivory tower and are sometimes in isolation of what is happening here and now in kindergarten"
Rules: workplace norms	Semiotic aspects related to workplace norms: illustrative example: CS: "The relationship between each CT and her student should be genuine and honest, so that if the student crosses professional limits, the CT needs to deal with it and not myself"	Political aspects related to workplace norms: illustrative example: Student: "On peak day everything needs to be very esthetic and pretty, for the supervisor from the Ministry of Education"
Community: the cultures of college and kindergarten	Semiotic aspects related to the cultures of college and kindergarten: illustrative example: Student: "In the regular program they teach us theories and concepts which we need to apply in kindergarten, such as an active assembly of children. As a student, you want to understand the meaning of such concepts in practice"	Political aspects related to the cultures of college and kindergarten: illustrative example: Student: "The CS' feedback was as follows: 'Had the supervisor from the Ministry of Education seen your activity, you wouldn't have passed. This is not how a kindergarten teacher operates'"
"Division of labor": Hierarchic vs equality-based forms of participation	Semiotic aspects related to hierarchic vs equality-based forms of participation: illustrative example: CS: "I am not the CT's supervisor. I never criticize. In order to create a change in the educational environment in kindergarten, I will walk the CT through a delicate and gradual process, sometimes with humor and without being judgmental, and at the end she will think that a change should be made"	Political aspects related to hierarchic vs equality-based forms of participation: illustrative example: CS: "The CT's supervisor clearly told them, 'Frida is your supervisor too'. She delegated authority"
Object: the student's learning process	Semiotic aspects related to the student's learning process: illustrative example CT: "The training process in the 'Academia–Classroom' program is very intensive. It demands a lot both from them and from me. They take part in every aspect of kindergarten life, including meeting with parents, conversations with the psychologist. At the end of the year I am sending out a true professional"	Political aspects related to the student's learning process: illustrative example CT: "Frida was very considerate. She asked the student if she truly wants Frida to walk her step by step through the entire activity she has just conducted. Since it was so weak, it needed lots of detailing. The student wanted to hear. We started, and then Frida told me, 'Thank you, we will take it from here.' It couldn't have been done in front of people; Frida needed her own space with the student, since it was such a harsh conversation"
Outcome: Professional learning	Semiotic aspects related to professional learning: illustrative example: CS: "Our expectations of the students are far beyond leading activities. They will build their own world-view, and deeply understand issues such as how to organize the educational environment, how to build professional relationships with their assistant and with parents"	Political aspects related to professional learning: illustrative example CS: "My goal is to develop a high standard kindergarten teacher, who is familiar with the requirements of the Ministry of Education"

Table I.
Examples of
data analysis

the program, which has so far been based on grades criteria. Her ideology is to include one or two students with lower grades in the group in order to offer them equal opportunities. Frida explains how she became committed to this ideology: "If in this project we will be able to grow one or two of these students, with the poor language and low grades […] then it will be a success of its own." Gal, the CT, says that she agrees in principle with this course of action, but finds it challenging to cope with it on a daily basis in her kindergarten. Yulia (ST) is an immigrant student from a lower socio-economic background, with average grades. She is aware that she does not meet the requirements of the program, but for her, the program is a trajectory that can offer her professional opportunities in the future. Yulia elaborates on her primary motive of applying to the program: "I came to the program because it offers a scholarship. Last year my father was fired, and my parents couldn't pay my tuition."

While the CS's own ideology of equal opportunities directs her course of action while choosing Yulia (ST), Gal (CT) does not get to take part in selecting the students. Frida (CS) sends each student to a kindergarten of her choice, and in this specific case, the result is a CT who receives a student whom she believes is not appropriate for the program.

The discrepancy between the different cultures of college and kindergarten is another central aspect of this triad. While the criteria for evaluating STs in kindergarten is based on uniform checklists (i.e. meeting deadlines or managing staff relations), the college assessment criteria emphasizes differential and individual processes of student learning. These different approaches are related to the values and work norms inherent in the different institutions of college and kindergarten, which constitute the workplace settings of each professional within the triad. The discrepancy between these values and work norms, alongside the lack of symmetry of power relations that unfolded between the CS and CT in the triad, is associated with a rather hierarchic perception of the division of labor between the two, as it unfolds in Frida's account: "Gal is at a very early professional stage. She is sometimes too strict with her students and I work with her on how to improve that aspect of her teaching."

Frida (CS) chooses to work in a dyad with the student in order to improve her work, hoping that the aspired improvement would eventually lead Gal (CT) to change her mind and believe in the student, as can be learned from Frida's own words: "Gal has a strict, inflexible approach toward the students […] I believed in Yulia and even helped her a little, so that Gal would see that Yulia can do it."

From the very beginning of their mentoring relationship, Frida (CS) positions herself as a source of empathy and support for Yulia (ST). Frida constantly helps Yulia to overcome obstacles so that Gal (CT) will be convinced that Yulia is capable of being a part of the program, thus contributing to Yulia's professional confidence. Frida's interview reveals the intensive and challenging mentoring process, which is being led by a determined supervisor who refuses to give up on her student. Frida (CS) elaborates: "Having Yulia facing requirements wasn't simple […] I sat with her alone many times, to help her built her own base […] she needed someone show her that she can, because she can."

In contrast, Gal (CT) constantly tries to work with Yulia (ST) on changing her behavior according to her own ideal model of a student, based on her experience with former students. Supposedly, Gal agrees with the ideology of equal opportunities, but stresses the point that in practice, it means complex challenges that the CT needs to deal with. Gal stresses the different roles of the CS and the CT in terms of the amount of time spent with the student and especially regarding the way in which each role is perceived by the students. Gal is convinced that she is the one who sees "the true Yulia" and is aware of the problematic aspects in her personality, while when Frida arrives, it is impossible for her to see Yulia beyond the way she presents herself in front of the CS.

At the end of the interview with Yulia (ST), she shares a story that sheds light on the consequences of a dissonant pattern of interaction within a mentoring triad: "Gal didn't take my picture for the year book, and I was offended and angry, because I think that I am also a

part of the kindergarten staff. […] It shows you Gal's character, she is inconsiderate and domineering. […] She intentionally did not include me. It makes me feel transparent [not seen] in kindergarten. […] I shared my feelings with Frida, and she intends to speak to Gal about it. Perhaps I had to talk with Gal myself, but I cannot."

The relatively low level of relational agency between the CS and CT enabled them to articulate their interpretations regarding Yulia's learning process, but they failed to openly negotiate other meaningful aspects of Yulia's learning process, such as the significance of truly relating to her as a part of the kindergarten staff.

As can be learned from the above, Frida (CS) and Gal (CT) see themselves differently in terms of the supervision process with Yulia (ST). Frida positions herself as an endlessly supportive figure, as compared to Gal who positions herself in constant doubt about whether Yulia is suitable for the program. While Gal perceives Yulia's difficulties as evidence of her incompatibility to the program, Frida believes that those difficulties are temporary challenges that Yulia can overcome with her guidance. As a result, Yulia is caught in dissonance between Frida's supportive and advocating discourse and Gal's elitist, detached discourse, hence hindering Yulia's learning process. Yulia internalizes contradicting messages regarding her professional abilities throughout the year and is left puzzled and torn toward the end of her studies. Nonetheless, Frida's trust and support enabled Yulia to grow, strive and to find a job as a kindergarten teacher.

Harmonic pattern of interaction: growing in the safety net of professional collaboration
The harmonic pattern of interaction is characterized by asymmetrical power relations between the CS and CT, congruence between the different cultures of college and kindergarten, and hierarchic division of labor, surfacing a fifth level of relational agency. This is evident in the harmonic collaboration between Frida (CS) and Riki (CT) regarding their students Noga and Svetlana. As in the previous case, the relations between Frida and Riki are asymmetrical. However, in this case, both Frida and Riki see their students' evaluations eye-to-eye: Noga (ST) is an excellent student while Svetlana (ST) is a student who faced many difficulties and eventually left the program. In creating relational agency, Riki and Frida were able to establish an equality-based division of labor, where each one of them worked with the students according to her own distinctive expertise, leading to an optimal learning process in the case of both students. Riki (CT) elaborates on her division of labor with Frida (CS) in the mentoring triad: "There is a natural flow; there isn't any fixed distribution between us. The way we work is built on the student's different needs from each one of us."

Noga (ST) points out two factors that advance her learning process, first, the dyadic relations she formed with Frida (CS) and with Riki (CT), and second, the harmony and mutual respect between these two professionals during the triadic mentoring conversations. Noga discusses two central topics regarding Frida in this context: the way in which her role is defined within the Academia–Classroom program and Frida's own unique personality. Due to the frequent and intensive period of practice teaching advocated by the program, Frida is well acquainted with both children and staff. As Noga (ST) notes, "Frida spends lots of time with us. […] She throws me to the water and wants me to do and try, but I always know that she is the safety net that I can approach no matter what […] She is someone I can completely trust."

Young *et al.*'s (2005) responsive, interactive and directive mentoring model can help us to make sense of the differences between each triad: Noga's learning process develops within an interactive triadic mentoring model, characterized by mutual recognition of each member of the triad as peers, each bringing distinctive and valuable contributions to the relationship. In this model, the action agenda is jointly established and adjusted to the needs of either mentor or protégé. The CS and CT's inputs within the triad are different, yet aligned, and together they manage to provide a comprehensive response to Noga's needs as a learner.

Frida (CS) sees Noga's learning as a developing process and is not judgmental in her observations of her performance. Above all, Frida exhibits strong interpersonal skills and manages to get to know and see the needs of the student. Noga (ST) respects and admires Frida: "She simply sees my needs […] she is professional from head to toe, but besides that she has the personal side, which I need many times. She has an enormous knowledge base and experience […] she dares to be original, she tries new teaching methods. […] It's inspiring."

Noga stresses that the way in which Frida encourages her independent thinking advances her learning process: "Her feedback is based on questions, because she wants me to answer. When you recognize your own mistakes and reflect on your own activity, you learn the most." While Frida (CS) leads Noga (ST) through meaningful reflection processes, Riki (CT) positions herself as an optimal model for practical performance. As Noga states, "Riki can build an activity from scratch. She improvises in seconds, uses opportunities for incidental learning […] Every child is heard, Riki is attentive to their stories and encourages them to share their experiences." Noga elaborates on Riki's ability to offer support while providing the student freedom of action: "I have my own way. I won't simply follow the college supervisor's instructions. But Riki knows how to release. She'll say, 'I trust you. Follow your own lead.' She releases me to be free, but she is there to assist when I need it."

Riki (CT) herself describes the way in which she advances her students' learning similarly: "Trusting her is very important, allowing her to experience. But I am right here if you need me […] being flexible with the students is crucial." Riki developed her professional ideology as a CT based on her past experience as a first grade teacher. Due to her realization that the principal did not trust her, she became frustrated and eventually left the school for kindergarten. Riki uses her painful learning experience to avoid the students feeling restricted, as she felt, "I look back on my experience in school; I wanted the management to have faith in me and trust me from the very beginning. It didn't happen, so I left. The principal came in to my lessons without a notice and tested me. It broke my spirit. Should she have given me my own space, my efforts would have been enormous, because I am trusted."

Noga (ST) also emphasizes that she learns about staff relations from observing Riki (CT): "Riki is the most patient and attentive person I have known in my life […] Even when she is not satisfied with her assistant that day, she'll comment with a smile and sense of humor. Riki taught me how to manage, empower and praise the staff."

In contrast to Noga, Svetlana – the other student trained in the same kindergarten – struggled to meet the program's requirements. Riki (CS) describes Svetlana's difficulties:

> I spent hours preparing her for the simplest activity, and at the end she did exactly the opposite in every aspect […] I told her she didn't follow our outline in a pleasant tone, without anger, even though I was furious […] Truly, it was one of the worst feedbacks I ever had to give a student.

Riki (CT) openly shares how she felt while observing Svetlana's activity: "I did my best to stop myself from getting up and stopping her while performing […] I just couldn't watch her tons of mistakes […]. I restrained myself and acted calm in front of her." Despite the enormous challenge, Riki uses her own coping mechanisms and manages to professionally handle the anger evoked by the student's behavior, as she describes: "Restraint, taking deep breaths. My motto from the beginning of the year is unconditional love, so I kept telling myself that. It was very hard."

As described, this is a case of a student who struggled to learn, and such cases could easily lead to a crisis within the mentoring triad. Despite the difficulties involved in mentoring such a student, Frida and Riki manage to work in the fifth level of relational agency. Svetlana's learning process within the mentoring space can be classified as following a directive mentoring model (Young *et al.*, 2005). Frida and Riki's positioning toward Noga suggests that they share a variety of skills and expertise that enables them to collaborate within the particular mentoring model selected for each student practicing in

kindergarten, according to her own needs and abilities. Their mentoring triad with Svetlana (ST) strengthens our claim that when the collaboration between the CS and CT is based on the fifth level of relational agency, they can optimally cope both with "stars" like Noga but also with students like Svetlana, who are prone to fail their studies.

Riki (CT) elaborates on the division of labor between herself and Frida (CS) in the triadic mentoring conversation:

> Frida asked Svetlana if she truly wants Frida to walk her step by step through the entire activity
> […] Svetlana wanted to hear. We started, and then Frida said, 'Riki, thank you, we will take it from
> here'. It couldn't have been done in front of people; Frida needed her own space with the student,
> since it was such a harsh conversation. The truth is that it really worked for me, not to be there.

Riki actually describes a gentle instruction from Frida to leave the room that enabled her to talk privately with the student. Frida's choice of action, which could easily have been interpreted as an insult or lead to a dispute as in the case of another CT as her partner, highlights the strength of the professional collaboration between the two. Frida enables Riki to distance herself from the tense conversation and decides to take the lead while giving Riki a chance to relax. To this end, Riki indicates that Frida's choice was right not only for the student, but also for herself. Hence, even in the most complex situations that demand prompt decisions, Riki and Frida operate in harmonic collaboration.

This story illustrates how relational agency at its highest level between the CS and CT leads to optimal learning, regardless of whether the student is strong or weak. Noga (ST) flourished and gained confidence in her abilities. She herself was able to identify not only the unique knowledge she developed through her work with each one of her mentors but also the harmonic collaboration between them and the way they inspired each other during the mentoring process. The high level of relational agency between the CS and CT led to an optimal mentoring process even in the very challenging case of Svetlana (ST). Each mentor recruited her own resources in working with Svetlana, and they were deeply involved in constant negotiation of aligned thoughts and actions to assist the ST in learning to teach. Despite these efforts, Svetlana still faced significant challenges in her contact with children. She decided to leave the program and end her studies. It should be noted that it was Svetlana's own decision. The high level of relational agency that characterized the mentoring triad allowed her to reflect on her suitability to the profession, without having those decisions imposed on her by the mentors:

> Argumentative pattern of interaction: Compromising between the college requirements and the
> daily teaching routine.

The argumentative pattern of interaction evolves with symmetrical power relations between professionals where they manage to acknowledge discrepancies between the different cultures of college and kindergarten. These discrepancies take place in an equality-based division of labor and within a fifth level of relational agency between professionals. This is revealed in the story of Frida (CS) and Daphna (CT) and dates from the beginning of their interactions. The two kindergarten teachers began their work as mentors at the same time. The first acquaintance between Frida and Daphna thus was based on an equal professional status, in contrast to Frida's relationship with the rest of the CTs which began as non-equal and was based on professional hierarchy. Frida and Daphna's relationship also can be viewed as an issue of prestige. While the rest of the CTs perceive Frida (CS) not just as the student's mentor but also as their own mentor whom they admirably look up to, Daphna (CT) is a senior kindergarten teacher who received an education award and is well known and appreciated in her local community. Frida describes Daphna in that context: "She is the elder of the tribe, a leading kindergarten teacher, very professional and well praised by parents and educational staff."

Frida (CS) and Daphna (CT) both worked as kindergarten teachers and as supervisors and both are very experienced, knowledgeable and well appreciated in the professional field. However, there are discrepancies in the way they view the college and kindergarten cultures. Daphna is the only CT who views the Academia–Classroom program critically and opposes certain components in the delicate balance between the requirements of the college and those of the field. The way Daphna describes the CT's role illustrates the importance she attributes to practice: "My responsibility is training the kindergarten's teachers of the future. Thus it's my job having them experience as much as possible active work with children [...] Much of the theory dissipates somewhere [...] what's important is how I work in the field."

The practice–theory tension constitutes a platform for unpacking a central topic that lies at the core of the process of relational agency that develops between Frida and Daphna: finding the right balance between "initiatives" and activities set for students at the college as part of their training process and acting within the daily routine of the kindergarten in the framework of the content and activities that the kindergarten teacher sets. Frida (CS) explains that these initiatives are part of the requirement of the college to have students prepare activities toward what they call the peak day: "The students choose a subject, explore, develop and apply it in the kindergarten. They are also required to plan and produce a festive peak day for that initiative." Daphna (CT) believes that the enormous investment demanded from the students in applying the college-required initiatives and focuses all their resources on a very specific subject at the expense of developing the holistic perception they need as kindergarten teachers. According to Daphna, "College demands are from the ivory tower and are sometimes in isolation of what is happening here and now in kindergarten." She sees these "initiatives" as an artificial and disconnected demand that the college imposes from above, which eventually hinders the learning process of the student because it creates a project-focused learning event instead of a holistic and intensive learning process.

Like Daphna, Frida was trained a generation ago, when a kindergarten teacher focused all her efforts on the children but did not face the demand of marketing her work outwardly. Daphna (CT) still believes in this ideology. In contrast, Frida (CS), who in the past also perceived "visibility" as unnecessary, underwent change in this respect as a part of her role as CS. When asked about why she finds visibility so important in the work of kindergarten teachers, she answers:

"It is part of what characterizes the 21st century. I had to change my perception and realize that today we are in a different era [...] kindergarten teachers today must publish their work and share it with others so everyone will know what they did, it is a part of the skills a kindergarten teacher should have."

The notion of visibility is often used by Frida in her conversations with students, and it is clearly stressed to them as a goal to which they should aspire and apply when they become professionals: "The student's work should be seen and heard by parents and by the supervisor. Visibility should be fully displayed, in documenting the processes in a way that enables her to show and justify actions."

As opposed to the other CTs in the program, Daphna presents Frida with a unique challenge when criticizing the program and claiming that the way it is applied blocks the student's learning process. Daphna (CT) argues that the grandiose requirements of the college come at the expense of learning the basic and daily work of the kindergarten teacher, which might be less appealing but is much more realistic. Compared to the CS who is committed to the college demands to promote visibility in order to market the new program to others, the CT is mainly committed to promoting pupil and ST learning. Thus, the CT decisively objects to the demand for "projects," "initiatives" and "peak days" in the practice of the kindergarten teacher, and perceives the college as an isolated ivory tower that is not connected to the field of daily routine in kindergartens. Daphna: "I think there isn't always a

parallel line between college demands and what actually happens in the field [...] Sometimes it doesn't fit [...] I am not going to force doing it in kindergarten, no way."

Frida (CS) does not belittle Daphna's argument regarding the initiatives demanded by the college as being an obstacle for the natural integration of students in the everyday life in kindergarten and its contents. In response, Frida tries to match the initiatives to the content in the kindergarten, so that they will be more relevant for the children and the CT and will not be perceived as a disconnected task.

Frida's reflection as a result of Daphna's critique reflects the high level of relational agency between the two. When Frida (CS) becomes aware that, despite the change she led in picking the content of initiatives from kindergarten's daily life, Daphna (CT) still feels that student's work is not connected enough to daily life in kindergarten, she looks for a different way to cope with Daphna's perceived fixation. Frida:

> Daphna claimed several times that the students didn't become integrated enough regarding the kindergarten's content. And indeed, I directed them to choose integrative content for their "initiatives" [...] But she claimed that it wasn't the case. So I ask myself, why? The preoccupation of expecting something very specific apparently brought Daphna to this kind of thinking.

As part of her role, Frida is also responsible for the professional development of the CTs who are part of the program. She picks the topics of lectures given by her or by other professionals as part of training the CTs to mentor students. As a result of her discussions with Daphna, Frida decides to focus on the dilemma between initiatives vs daily content with the group of CTs in the framework of their professional lectures and discussions. Frida:

> From Daphna I realized that some things should be worked on in the group of CTs, and that it is a gradual process that shouldn't be taken for granted [...] I learned that I should tune myself to the CT's very specific needs.

However, and as a characteristic of the form that their relational agency takes, Frida (CS) does not always agree with Daphna's critique. Frida:

> In the beginning she has very high expectations from students [...] I explained to her that it is a process, they are young and inexperienced [...] It's understanding you can't expect them to be what she is today [...] Sometimes I need to balance her expectations.

Frida truly listens to Daphna's critique and tries to revise the program to better cater to all the students in the program. Frida also acknowledges Daphna's determination alongside her openness to change. Frida (CS) describes her work with Daphna (CT) in that context:

> At first there is always fixation. Daphna is always the one to say "it is less relevant" [...] or "there isn't enough time." I accept it as a part of dealing with change; as a consequence of her experience and seniority [...] on the other hand, there is a true readiness to try different things. At the end she is always the first to enable students to experience new initiatives such as co-teaching.

Despite the gaps and the difference of opinion between them, both Frida and Daphna indicate that it does not harm their relations, which are based on a strong sense of mutual respect and on productive professional relations that inspire them both. Frida (CS): "It never taints the relationship. There is a conversation, and later on things happen and develop [...] Daphna is very attentive and wants to innovate." Daphna (CT) also describes a deep connection that is built on true confidence: "I totally trust Frida. It should be clear that I also learn from her and not only the students. We are true partners in the process of learning, in the way of teaching, in planning, in throwing ideas."

Frida and Daphna use those situations in which they hold different perspectives as learning opportunities for students. Daphna (CT): "Usually we see things eye-to-eye. Having said that, in some places, we will openly and respectfully discuss [...] it never reaches an argument [...] the conversation is based on openness, we share and discuss our feelings."

Daphna relates to the student's learning process in such situations: "We bring two aspects to the same case. The student is exposed to the discussion between us regarding her actions and gains insights." The impact of such level of relational agency between the two mentors on the ST's learning is evident in Ma'ayan's (ST) account of an activity conducted with kindergarten children:

> In the beginning the children were calm, and then they lost it. It was very hard for me to conduct the activity, and the feedback was accordingly. I took it very hard [...] I realized that in certain situations in kindergarten you need to let go. Some things cannot be planned, so you should follow the reactions of the children and learn to let go during the activity.

The kind of learning described by the ST can be attributed to Frida and Daphna's intensive acquaintance, constant joint reflection and acknowledgment of each other's expertize and mutual recognition of the uniqueness of their respective reactions to different mentoring situations.

Furthermore, after facing challenges and professional differences of opinions, the two mentors eventually manage to transform their differences into effective tools for collaborating in the Academia–Classroom program. Their story illustrates the process of searching for the right compromise between the college's concern with visibility and relevance (requiring comprehensive projects to be planned and implemented by STs in the kindergarten) and the daily, invisible teaching routine that often clashes with unrealistic expectations of visibility. The symmetrical power relations that develop, combined with a high level of relational agency between the two mentors, enables them to solve these discrepancies; they can then use the specific challenges they face in their triad to develop new forms of collaborative work within the partnership. Consequently, their mentees were part of an open and respectful discussion regarding the topics of dispute; this, in turn, advanced their learning in optimal ways.

To further illustrate the above, consider Ma'ayan's words (ST) regarding how her learning process was enhanced by witnessing Frida (CS) and Daphna (CT) disagreeing agreeably. Ma'ayan:

> At the beginning of the year, we looked for the project that I will lead this year in kindergarten. We sat outside at the playground, Frida, Daphna and I, each one of us raised ideas, until we established it. But it wasn't like they argued, it had a feeling that all of us are together in it. In order to stay motivated, and wish to continue growing and developing, the interaction between the three of us must be based on a clear rationale. I must understand what the goal is behind each idea.

Discussion

The selected cases reveal the complex process in which relational agency develops within mentoring triads in early childhood education and its influence on the learning process of the ST within the triad. Relational agency occurs at sites of intersecting practices where people from different backgrounds or practices come together (Edwards, 2017). When examined in the context of mentoring, these different backgrounds or practices operate as contextual factors that influence the direction that professional learning and expertise can take (Langdon, 2017).

Stressing the importance of mentors' development, Edwards (2017) claims that both universities and schools should be involved in educating tomorrow's teachers as thoughtful and responsive professionals. However, consideration should be taken regarding the proper way to design learning environments and position field mentors and university tutors within them, so that the environment itself is knowledge-rich, presenting demands that propel the learning of beginning teachers. In this respect, our study supports and further elaborates Edwards' model of relational agency in complex learning environments and adds to the research literature that explores the complexities, strengths and challenges of mentoring as a collaborative activity and its implications for STs' learning (e.g. Brondyk and Searby, 2013; Hobson and Malderez, 2013; Pleschova and McAlpine, 2015; Shanks, 2017; Tonna *et al.*, 2017).

The new patterns of interaction identified in the mentoring triad can serve as interpretative tools to help CSs, kindergarten teachers and students identify their own patterns of interaction and levels of relational agency in mentoring processes. In doing so, they can be encouraged to further explore strengths and challenges in their work.

Conclusion

Focusing on mentored ST learning in early childhood education, this study explored mentoring as a joint activity within the particular cultural–historical context. Integrating CHAT and relational agency, the current study offers an additional lens for interpreting how the delicate and complex processes within mentoring triads evolve into recognizable patterns of interactions. Such exploration can constitute an initial platform for further identification and classification of new patterns of interaction in mentoring triads.

We are aware of the limitations of the study. As mentioned before, triadic mentoring processes are complex, and the limits of the specific study did not allow for delving into other factors that could have come into play in the mentoring triads and influence the patterns of interaction and levels of relational agency that emerged. For example, the study did not relate to the possible innate differences in personality of the STs and their natural dispositions to teaching, which alongside the variation regarding each student's different skills and levels of self-confidence, could have influenced the way the CT and CS related to them, thereby affecting the mentoring relationship.

Despite these limitations, the study proposes a useful analytical framework for studying mentored teacher learning in complex environments. It identifies the factors that promote and hinder ST learning in mentoring triads, mapping the strengths and challenges of school–university collaborations in the context of learning to teach in kindergarten settings. Table II illustrates the connections between the identified patterns of interaction, the different features characterizing each pattern through the lens of relational agency and CHAT, and the mentored learning outcome of each pattern of interaction.

Aspects of the mentoring triad	Pattern of interaction: classification		
	Dissonant	Harmonic	Argumentative
Level of relational agency	Third level: eliciting interpretations regarding problems of practice	Fifth level: collaborating in order to expand the object that one is working on and trying to transform it	Fifth level: collaborating in order to expand the object that one is working on and trying to transform it
Division of labor: hierarchic vs equality-based forms of participation	Hierarchic	Hierarchic	Equality based
Community: cultures of college and kindergarten	Discrepancy between the different cultures of college and kindergarten	Congruence between the different cultures of college and kindergarten	Discrepancy between the different cultures of college and kindergarten
Subject: mentoring triad	Asymmetrical power relations between the two professionals within the triad	Asymmetrical power relations between the two professionals within the triad	Symmetrical power relations between the two professionals within the triad
Outcome: professional learning	Hindered learning process	Promoted learning process	Promoted learning process

Table II.
Connections between patterns of interaction, relational agency, CHAT and mentored learning outcome

The study exposes the distinctive patterns of interaction that develop in triadic mentoring interactions, through an examination of the emergent levels of relational agency that develop. The study invites CSs, kindergarten teachers and students to explore the patterns of interaction that develop in their unique contexts of mentoring and how these might promote or hinder professional learning.

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