

A Matter of Reflection or Evaluation?¹

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“Andy, I feel so horrible for her. You know, I think Delia dreads coming to work every day. This morning she told me she cried herself to sleep last night. Has that ever happened to you in mentoring? I don’t feel like there’s ANYTHING I can say to make her feel better.” Lia slumped into a chair.

Even though he was on the phone, Andrew Money could just feel the pained look on his friend and former co-worker Lia Lebron’s face as he switched the phone receiver to his other ear. Taking a drink of his coffee and putting on his Mentoring Liaison hat, Andrew began, “Lia, there’s only so much you can do as a mentor. You remember your first year as a teacher, right? I think that maybe it’s just hitting her hard because it’s so far from what she expected. She’s from a really different environment, with a totally different context and experience of schooling. I mean, how much can you really gain over a summer—fewer kids per class, co-teaching in the classroom—and then BAM! There they are—all alone in the classroom with all those kids and each of their unique situations staring back at them. Geez, I still remember my first year and I actually had attended a teacher ed program.”

“I know what you mean, Andy. I think that she probably expected everything to be flowing by now—after all it’s almost spring recess...I just wish there was something I could say or do, but I know that’s not how mentoring is supposed to work. It also doesn’t help that I’m not able to meet with her the way I’m supposed to every week with the schedule changes and the testing. Everything seems to get in the way on a daily basis. I do think she has a lot of promise—I can see it, Andy. We touch base here and there,

¹ This case was written by Elizabeth Gil, Teacher and MetLife Fellow in the Teachers Network Leadership Institute. Materials for this case were taken extensively from *Hand-In-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration* conducted by Carmen Vargas, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2005. To protect individuals and organizations, the case has been disguised. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective practice. Copyright © 2009 Elizabeth Gil and Teachers Network Leadership Institute.

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but we don't really get that 'sit down' time. Oh, man, look at the time—I told myself I'd get to bed earlier tonight. I've been so tired all week.”

Lia Lebron

In the beginning of the school year, Lia Lebron had happily accepted the assignment of being a mentor. With her 12 years of teaching experience, first teaching every grade from kindergarten through third and now a literacy coach and test coordinator, she believed that she had a lot to offer and believed that teacher support was supremely important to keeping teachers in the profession, no matter through what pathway they entered the profession—traditional or alternative. In September, she imagined lively, frequent interactions with her mentee—the curriculum conversations, sharing strategies and successes, and even some of the bumps in the road that she could help her mentee through. Certainly the school-based mentoring model was better than what she had seen over the years—either no mentoring at all, or mentors who came in once a week, but were not part of the school community and didn't have much to offer. Lia felt that model didn't work at all. And then there was her principal, Jackie Gutierrez, who was extremely excited about school-based mentoring from the start.

As Lia thought back to the beginning of the school year, she could still picture the sparkle in Delia's eyes when they met at the beginning of the school year. Now that sparkle was all but gone. Lia and Delia had made an instant connection. Delia grew up in Michigan while Lia had attended college there. Over the last three months, though, little by little, the light in Delia's eyes seemed to be dimming. Lia could see the stress and hesitation in the young teacher's demeanor, in the way she walked in the hall with her head down or turned the other way when she saw the principal coming. At moments, sarcasm and even anger emerged when she spoke to Lia about a student in trouble yet again, “Isn't that a shocker?” she might say. Or about the latest meeting a parent had missed, “Well, wasn't that another wasted prep, yippee!” Wasn't it too soon for a young teacher to become so cynical? Was it inevitable for a new teacher in her circumstances?

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Delia Franklin

There was no doubt that the children in Delia's third grade class were a handful. They were so cute that one would never imagine the issues that abounded in the class. Four of her 25 students were in temporary housing, including shelters. Three were being raised by family members other than their parents. More than that, the people raising these children were not their legal guardians, making any major decisions about educational support services nearly impossible. There seemed to be a great deal of unkindness and bullying in the class, not to mention the disrespect toward Delia that seemed to be increasing day by day. Delia didn't even know that eight-year olds *could* have that much bad attitude and baggage—where did they keep it in those little, eight-year old bodies!? Why was it that when Lia said something to correct behavior in the hallway, they didn't roll their eyes or talk back?, Deia asked herself.

As she considered the day ahead of her, Delia wondered, "What do they do, just save it all for me—all those little morsels of hate and anger?" The closest thing she could drum up to a positive response was, "I know that can't be it with all the fights that break out in the auditorium, the gym, the library and let's not forget what happened in art last week! But then again, when something goes wrong, it is all my fault, right?" She sighed, caught the pile of books she was balancing in her arms as she turned the key, and pushed open the door to her classroom.

New Leadership at The Enrichment School, Hamilton Heights

As a Principal, Jackie Gutierrez was tough, but she only expected from others what she expected of herself. Her "no excuses" attitude frustrated some of the teachers at The Enrichment School, a Pre-K to 4 school. Others saw it as a positive change from the previous principal who had retired after running the school for 10 years, leaving a great deal of disorder behind.

Jackie had been teacher in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a very tough part of town, for seven years. Therefore, she had a strong belief in high expectations and what educators should do for their students to ensure that those expectations were met. This view grounded her leadership style. As a teacher she worked 24/7, and knew what it as

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like to positively impact a student's life. She saw no reason why this same dedication would not be possible for all of the teachers at her school now. Even today, Gutierrez kept in touch with several of her former students. She knew the satisfaction of seeing a former student graduate first in his class in high school. She also knew the heartbreak of losing one to the streets.

In her first year as principal at the Enrichment School, Gutierrez was acutely aware of the context she had inherited from the school's previous principal. Located in Hamilton Heights, Enrichment was a neighborhood school with a population of 521 students, with 69% Black, 27% Hispanic, and 4% Asian students. The student body included 37% English language learners, representing five different languages including Spanish, Arabic, and Urdu. During the previous year, many of these English language learners had not received the mandated hours of English as a second language services as established by state guidelines. 14.5% of the school's students were special education students and the average attendance rate for the school during the previous school year was 87.9%, below the City expectation which was 95% for elementary school. At any one time during the school year, there were five to 10 students in the school who lived in temporary housing, sometimes from the same family. The school received Title I funding with 87% eligibility. Enrichment's faculty was relatively young with half comprising teachers who had taught for less than four years. Of the 30 teachers, 10 of them were completely new to the teaching profession.

Gutierrez felt invigorated by a session she'd seen presented over the summer about school-based mentoring. She was highly aware that an effective teacher is the greatest determinant of students' academic success. Goodness knew her school was going to need it. Mentoring would be a key vehicle to avoid having the state take over the school the following year. "This is a great structure," she thought to herself. Teachers supporting teachers, a framework for teacher development, this was great! With its five levels of development and specific elements to describe each, it would be a terrific way for her to see "where" her teachers were throughout the year" Gutierrez felt that prior to this session, she was not sure exactly how to implement an objective way to evaluate progress of the new teachers in the school. Soon after, she had a meeting with the school's most veteran teachers and asked for volunteers to mentor these new

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teachers, and with that, she was able to assign her beginning teachers their mentors. It was a pleasant surprise that she didn't have to pull any teeth to put this initiative into place. "If only everything else I wanted to do for the school could go as smoothly," she thought to herself.

The Honeymoon Is Over

On a crisp and frosty January morning, Jackie held the elevator door open with her newspaper so Lia could get in. "Hey, Lia, have you been meeting with Delia? You know she needs a lot of work, right? I getting a lot of parent complaints. You're her mentor, so you must know what is going on in there. . I know what I see when I do my walks, but you see so much more. Remember, we want to move toward that 'innovative' stage. I'm counting on you." As the elevator door opened on the second floor, Jackie winked at Lia and proceeded to her office, that last sentence having been added with a sweet melody in her voice. But it didn't feel sweet at all. Lia bit her lip and just stared at her principal as she walked away. Was it hot in the school elevator or was it just Lia? She called Andy that afternoon.

"Oh my God, Andy, I felt so uncomfortable, I thought I was going to flip for a second there. I was thinking, 'Uh, am I a mentor or an administrative agent?' That's not what I signed up for, you know. You never listed "informant" as one of my mentoring roles. Mentoring is supposed to be a safe space for Delia to be able to grow and develop—and that thing about 'innovative'...geez, Andy you know that can't be reached in ten months—shoot--you might not reach it in ten years! She's just a beginning teacher, not a seasoned educator!" Lia's voice reached a higher pitch as she asked, "Wasn't that made clear to principals in whatever mentoring training they got? They did get some kind of background about the mentoring program, didn't they? It's not as simple as just moving from beginning to emerging to applying..."

"I don't know Lia, but Jackie's been pretty cool so far, hasn't she? You know I can't speak for principals because when I was a mentor, the only thing the principal ever said to me about mentoring was 'Andy—I'm assigning you three mentees,' and that was it. He couldn't care less about it, really—to him, it is a program on paper. That's all.

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Maybe Jackie just doesn't get it, even though she means well. Why not talk to her about it?"

Lia sighed and said, "Oh I don't know Andy. She's so gung ho, I don't know that she'll get it—not on this issue. Well, I'd better get going. Laundry calls. Thanks for lending an ear."

Thursday Morning, Third Period Debriefing Meeting

As Lia and Delia sat across from one another in Lia's room, Delia stared out the window. The desperation was clearly evident in her voice. "So I try to plan my lessons, but what do I do when 18 of my 25 students can't even read at a first grade level? And some of *those* kids don't even know all of their letters!? God forbid I turn my back on Caleb. When I talked about community building before the winter break, I was not-so-subtly reminded by Ms. Gutierrez that this was the first year my kids were testing and that preparation is the focus—not social games. She said that can be done during Phys. Ed. or in counseling—those who get counseling, anyway. Between assessments, being pulled out of class for meetings, that PD program I was signed up for, calling parents—1/2 of whom I don't even have active numbers for, and maintaining parent communication logs, I don't really understand when we're supposed to meet. I know it's not your fault Lia, and your encouraging smiling face is a comfort, but honestly, this is just too much for me."

Lia understood Delia's concern about her students' challenges. She had witnessed them first-hand. She also saw openings for addressing those needs. During her classroom visits, she had noticed that three of the students who were most off-task were also sitting at the back of the room, seated together in an area where Delia seldom circulated. Lia had brought this up in a previous meeting with Delia and had offered to help her rearrange her seating plan, but then this never happened. Her role as a mentor was not about doing it *for* her mentee, but doing it *with* her mentee.

Aside from being glad that she could offer a "smiling face," Lia did not feel that she was helping Delia much. She did get into Delia's classroom at least one period every other week, but they never seemed to have time to debrief those classroom visits.

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And when they did debrief, like they were finally able to do this March morning, Lia tried not to say too much and risk overwhelming Delia. After all, she was supposed to take the lead from Delia's comments.

"She hates me, doesn't she. Gutierrez wants to get rid of me," Delia said pulling a wisp of her blonde hair from her eyes as she stared down at her planbook. "Tell me, just how thin a thread am I hanging on?"

Lia tried to muster up a smile, but she only managed a look that was interpreted by Delia as pity. Lia hated feeling caught in the middle of this teacher – principal dynamic that had formed over the last few months.

"Delia, I don't think anyone hates you. Every first-year teacher has growing pains. We are supposed to look at your practice when we get together; it's the only time that you can do this objectively. I know that sounds kind of clinical, but I think if we get a chance to talk about what is going on in class, you'd see that there are a lot of great things that you're building on in your classroom. I know we haven't debriefed a visit in a while, but something I've noticed—your reflection on your lessons is improving. I've been wanting to share it with you for a while now, when we could really talk. I notice that you are getting around to conference with your students. That's really positive."

Was Lia right to redirect this conversation or should she have entertained a conversation about Delia and Jackie? Delia looked a little surprised by Lia's positive feedback and she shook her head, "Really?" For the first time in a long while, Lia thought she heard some hope in Delia's voice.

The prep period was coming to close, and Jackie Gutierrez happened to walk in as the two teachers were wrapping up. Lia noticed that Delia tensed up immediately, but both the principal and the first year teacher greeted each other cordially. Unconsciously, Lia started playing with the ring on her left hand, twisting it around and around. This was a habit she'd picked up in high school whenever she felt really, really stressed about something. Delia said, "Well thanks Lia, that was very helpful. Gotta go and get ready for my class!" With that Delia got up, gathered her papers, and left the room.

When Delia had left the room, Jackie whispered to Lia, "So? Debriefing, huh? Mrs. Martin came to speak to me again about Sadiq being bullied and about the

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homework he's being assigned. I don't know what else to do with Delia since I have spoken to her about both of these issues more than once. What's really going on in there? I don't know that I am going to be able to give her a satisfactory rating by the end of the year." Jackie looked at the pile of papers in front of Lia, shuffled them a bit, looked at Lia with a smile and said, "So, what were you all talking about today?" Lia tried to mask her discomfort by using humor, "You know that's top secret information, Jackie. So, what's up? Did the latest testing materials come in? It's about that time—AGAIN! More testing." "Actually," Jackie said pensively, "it's about the professional development going on next week—on the online accountability system."

Lia had managed to dodge another bullet once again. But how much longer would that last?

Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the role, if any, of evaluation within a mentoring structure?
- 2) What qualities, other than teaching experience are needed to be an effective mentor to a new teacher?
- 3) What could make this mentoring situation more effective?