

# Students Mentoring Students in K-8 Classrooms: Creating a learning community where children communicate, collaborate, and succeed

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Students Mentoring Students in K-8 Classrooms: Creating a learning community where children communicate, collaborate, and succeed**

By Diane Vetter

Markham, ON: Pembroke 2023, 126 pages (paperback)

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#### **Reviewed by:**

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Diane Vetter's (2023) *Students Mentoring Students in K-8 Classrooms: Creating a learning community where children communicate, collaborate, and succeed* is a guide for teachers to develop pedagogical approaches and classroom environments that help empower elementary students to support each other throughout the learning process. Relevant student development and related literature such as the theories of Jean Piaget (1959) are operationalized into tangible instructions for classroom activities that are further enriched by autoethnographical anecdotes from Vetter's own experience as an elementary school teacher (pp. 14-19). This book is a useful resource for K-8 educators looking to promote student collaboration and leadership in their classrooms. It also has value for education researchers looking to understand the first steps in students' leadership skill development as well as capacity building for collective decision-making and action.

The book contains five chapters along with a brief introduction and conclusion. The introduction illustrates Vetter's experience teaching grade two students about the tragic events on September 11, 2001, providing a heartfelt example of the potential for

students mentoring each other (pp. 7-9). After discussing concepts such as peacekeeping and peacemaking, students created messages of peace and shared them with students and staff throughout the school, making a small but meaningful contribution towards promoting peace in their community (pp. 7-9).

Chapter one outlines Vetter's theoretical framework comprising three main components. The first enshrines the importance of students being able to communicate constructively with each other during the learning process using techniques such as sharing questions and wonderings, and steps in thought processes to prepare students for deeper thinking (pp. 14-18). The second component, collaboration, draws from John Dewey's (1997) ideas of the educational aspects inherent in communication to construct processes for students to provide feedback on pedagogy as well as apply their unique knowledge and skills to enrich learning experiences (pp. 19-23). The third component is community, which involves creating a space where students feel comfortable expressing concerns and taking risks while reinforcing learning as a common goal of all in the classroom that requires students to help each other along the way (pp. 23-30).

Chapter two focuses on classroom communication and provides examples of activities that can help students develop capacities for richer dialogue. These examples include role playing to help students understand others' perspectives, scaled feedback systems for self-review and peer-review, as well as thinking exercises to unlock deeper-level why questions (pp. 31-49).

Chapter three explores how physical classroom spaces can be shaped to promote collaboration and peer mentorship. Vetter describes a strategy developed in her classrooms where students sit at four-desk groups around the perimeter of the room in a way that insides of desks cannot be used (pp. 51-54). The teacher's desk is part of the perimeter arrangement and there is a central table in the centre of the classroom for collaborative activities where items meaningful to the class can be shared (pp. 53-56). School supplies are in crates on shelves instead of being inside desks (pp. 55-56). Activities are provided to randomize seating, so students have opportunities to work with different peers (pp. 56-57). There are also recommendations for an equity-minded approach to technology in the classroom as well as strategies to organize lesson plans and provide specialized observational evaluations of students (pp. 57-72).

Chapter four covers exercises and strategies to integrate different ways of knowing to support learning and challenge dichotomous understandings of right and wrong

approaches. This takes the form of activities to help students understand different ways of showing their work to solve math problems and draws from Indigenous teachings, particularly the work of Elder Albert Marshall (n.d.), to integrate multiple ways of knowing to support learning (pp. 73-82). It also outlines ways for students to build leadership skills by contributing to shared classroom responsibilities in a context in which the teacher is understood as a co-learner (pp. 82-95).

Chapter five applies the book's strategies to twenty-first century contexts and challenges. Exercises are designed to promote mental health and wellbeing, establish foundational skills and competencies for political citizenship through exploring impacts of global challenges on students' lives, and promote social and environmental stewardship (pp. 97-117). The brief conclusion offers words of encouragement for educators and invites them to adjust and build upon the book's recommended practices (pp. 118).

Having been a grade one student on September 11, 2001, I found similarities in Vetter's approach that day with the approach of my grade one teacher. I often had to pause to reflect while reading when I would find a connection to deep memories of how my elementary teachers implemented similar activities to empower students. This book left me with a feeling of thankfulness for the good teachers who helped me get to the point where I can write this review. Vetter's experience-based perspective palpably exudes her care for her students. Having spent much of my academic career thus far identifying challenges facing student leadership, from approaches that do not empower students to outright dangers to the future of students having a say in their education (Patrick, 2022, 2023), the book left me deeply moved and renewed my hope for the future of the discipline. I hope that teacher educators take note and include this book in their syllabi.

What fascinates me most is the book's potential for helping students become leaders and changemakers not only in the future, but also in their present school communities. In the spirit of Vetter's use of questions to encourage deeper thinking, I have some questions for further research. What is the potential of students mentoring students in preparing students for more structured forms of collective decision-making in higher levels of education such as in high school student governments and postsecondary student unions? What should a comprehensive, longitudinal student leadership pedagogy connecting Vetter's work to these higher stages of student leadership comprise, and what would be the implications for political education as well as student development theory and practice?

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