

Teacher Education Faculty as Supervisors/Advisors/Facilitators: Playing Multiple Roles in the Construction of Field Work Experiences

By Helen Freidus

As we enter the new millennium, controversy rages about the best ways to prepare teachers and literacy specialists to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse world of learners. It is clear that broader-based, context sensitive models of teaching and teacher education are needed, but these are yet to be identified. Recognizing the need to take up the gauntlet, the Bank Street College Reading and Literacy Program is currently examining its practices and challenging the assumptions on which they are based. Given the overwhelming evidence that field experiences play a crucial role in the preparation of teachers (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990), it makes sense for any self-study by a program of teacher education to include a consideration of field experience. Such consideration is particularly relevant at Bank Street where advisement, the year of supervised field experience, is seen as the heart of the teacher preparation process.

*Helen Freidus is a
professor at the Bank
Street College of
Education, New York
City, New York.*

The Bank Street Reading/Literacy Program was started in 1980 when the certification category was first offered by New York State. The program has grown and evolved since then in response to changing needs and a changing population. In the first year, only three students participated in field work; today, 24 men and women are in field placements. Origi-

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nally the program served only pre-service teachers; today, the program offers credentials to pre-service and in-service teachers at both the Masters and post Masters level of preparation. Over time, we have come to understand better the complex needs and interests of both our students and the students they serve. Our challenge is to find effective ways of addressing these needs and interests.

In 1916, Bank Street founder, Lucy Sprague Mitchell called for ongoing “flexibility when confronted with change and an ability to relinquish patterns that no longer fit the present.” Later, she wrote:

We are not interested in perpetuating any special “school of thought.” Rather, we are interested in imbuing teachers with an experimental, critical and ardent approach to their work. If we accomplish this, we are ready to leave the future of education to them. (Mitchell, in Antler, 309)

Our goal is to improve our ability to identify and respond to changing conditions within our own graduate school, the schools we serve, and the community at large. Hence, this article focuses on the vision of student teaching in the Bank Street College Reading and Literacy Program and the role of the advisor (supervisor) in this process.

Method

The methods of study that we have chosen for this inquiry are qualitative in design and selected to provide a case study of supervision within a teacher education program in which teachers are prepared to be literacy leaders and specialists. They include

- ✓ surveys comprised of open-ended questions administered in 1996-1997 to 150 alumnae of the Bank Street Reading and Literacy Program;
- ✓ mid-year and end-of the year written feedback forms completed by students during their years of supervised fieldwork between 1996-2000;
- ✓ field notes from monthly conferences between students and advisors during those same years;
- ✓ conversations held within the context of weekly conference groups that take place throughout the fieldwork year.

The data were scanned on an ongoing basis to seek out continuities, consistencies, and recurrent patterns, and to identify common themes. Through a process of ongoing reference to the literature in the fields of teacher development and literacy and constant comparison of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), emergent categories were identified. Data were then scanned once more and coded according to emergent categories. The comparison of survey responses, feedback forms, individual conferences and conference group data provided a means of triangulation of data (Miles

& Huberman, 1994). The narrative quality of the data, especially the feedback forms and notes from weekly and monthly conversations has provided a context for written and oral responses. As a result, our data has proven to be both “thick” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and nuanced (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Supervised Field Work at Bank Street: The “Advisement” Model

Strongly influenced by Dewey’s writings, Bank Street seeks to emphasize the individuality of each learner as well as the need for community building. The college tries to provide its graduates with the kinds of experiences that it is hoped they will provide for their students. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the advisement process, the year of supervised field work that is required in all Bank Street programs.

Advisement includes a number of traditional components of field work: classroom observations by faculty supervisors called “advisors”, individual conferences between advisors and student teachers, three way conferences with cooperating teachers for pre-service students and with administrators for in-service teachers. In each of these components, a dialogical model supplants the traditional “banking” structures of education (Freire, 1984).

Conferences

The year-long relationship between student and advisor provides many opportunities for exploring issues from diverse perspectives. Advisors meet twice monthly with their advisees in regularly scheduled individual conferences. These take two forms; the goal of each is the development of reflective practice. The first is an *individual conference* in which discussion is related to a student’s interests, observations, and concerns. The conference is designed to provide a safe forum for exploring and linking personal and professional issues and concerns. It is considered to be a time for building relationships between advisor and student and establishing the kind of trust that promotes risk taking and exploration.

The second is a *post-observation conference* directly related to classroom issues. The conference is designed to follow a classroom visit and may include a cooperating or supervising administrator. Here, too, trust building is an essential component. Post-observations conferences do not incorporate checklists or other frequently administered formal evaluation tools. The goal of these conferences is to move the locus of critique from advisor to student. For this reason, conferences almost invariably begin with an advisor saying: “What did you think? How did you feel the lesson went?” Through the conversations that ensue, students are encouraged to articulate their intended goals, reflect on the design and implementation of their lessons, and consider the ways in which the lessons were successful and/or unsuccessful. Advisors / supervisors facilitate analysis by posing a series of probing

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questions designed to scaffold the student's process of self-critique. The focus of these conferences is not on whether a lesson is good or bad, but on what works and why. The following excerpt provides an example of the commonly held post-observation protocol among Bank Street advisors:

I ask my students, "What were you thinking of at such and such time? In responding to this, they become aware that they were making a decision at that time and at hundreds of other times a day. . . . I then remind them that what they decide is not as important as their awareness that a decision has to be made. They need to be able to think on their feet, make a reasonable choice, and articulate this choice. If it is the "wrong" choice, the lesson will not work well; they will learn from experience how to do it better the next time. So, there really is no wrong choice. (Rice, 2000)

In addition to the dyadic conference structures described above, the advisement process includes a third interactive format: the *conference group*. Conference group is a weekly seminar in which each faculty advisor meets together with his or her five to seven advisees. In these seminars, students engage in extended conversations about past and present classroom experiences. The faculty advisor's role in this process is that of facilitator.

In the Reading and Literacy program, groups are composed of both Masters and Post-Masters candidates. We find that these mixed groups enable new teachers to pose important questions, questions that encourage veterans to reflect upon, explain, and question their own practice. Often, veteran teachers tell stories and pose questions that compel new teachers to examine their emerging beliefs and practices. Supervision becomes a collaborative experience as participants reflect upon and critique their own work as well as that of their colleagues. In so doing, they begin to assume responsibility for their own professional development and they become resources in the professional development of their peers.

Goals

The goals of the advisement (supervision) process are to help teachers to understand and engage in: (1) teaching that is well informed by theory and research, (2) teaching that is not only systematic but reflective and mindful as well, and (3) teaching that makes a contribution toward social change. According to Cambourne (1999), systematic teaching is that which is carefully planned. The systematic teacher can explain in confident and coherent ways why he or she chooses specific teaching / learning activities and processes and how such activities facilitate their students' learning. However, Cambourne points out that systematic teaching is not always learner centered. One can be systematic by having a thorough knowledge of materials and past teaching/learning experiences. Teachers can provide articulate rationales for their practice and still fail to take into account the strengths, needs, interests, and "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) of the children that they are currently teaching.

To reach each child's potential, teachers, according to Cambourne, must be reflective and mindful as well as systematic. Mindfulness is directly related to how teachers take in information. Reflection and mindfulness require a critical stance (Cambourne, 1999). Teachers who have learned their strategies and skills—even their philosophy—through a “banking” model (Freire, 1984) are unlikely to be able to engage mindfully with their own students. Their instructional responses, although carefully planned, may be invariant and lacking in context specific nuance. The instruction they choose may make sense to them but not necessarily to the learners with whom they work.

Many of the students who come to Bank Street have received much of their previous schooling through a variety of transmission models. They are unaccustomed to an interactive, learner-centered model of teaching and learning. By having one faculty member serve as advisor, supervisor, and facilitator throughout the fieldwork year, it is often possible to raise questions over time, stimulate cognitive dissonance, and help students to identify and engage in practice that is increasingly learner-centered and grounded in theory. The multiple roles played by faculty members provide pervasive forums for exploring the connections between theory, practice, and personal experience. At its best, this process helps students to become reflective and mindful as well as systematic. When this happens, teachers are more likely to engage in the kinds of practice that lead to social change which is and has always been an articulated goal of teacher education at Bank Street (Antler, 1987).

From the beginning, advisement has been designed to help teachers develop the habits of mind and habits of instruction that make such change possible (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). The charge of advisors in the Reading and Literacy Program, therefore, is to help teachers develop a repertoire of assessment and instructional strategies that enable all children not only to become readers and writers but also to become critical readers and critical thinkers. In the world of literacy classrooms where “best practice” is a much contested subject, where instruction is often linked to standardized testing models that have remained substantially unchanged over the past 80 years, and where mandated assessment and/or instructional models often impede rather than facilitate culturally responsive teaching (Willis & Harris, 2000), advisors face a daunting challenge.

The Field

In the beginning, fieldwork in the Reading and Literacy Program, as in all Bank Street programs, was designed as an apprenticeship model. Preservice students were placed in progressive independent schools under the tutelage of seasoned cooperating teachers. In these sites, cooperating teachers, school administrators, and college advisors/supervisors shared common visions of education and valued common practices. As a result, little explicit instruction was needed. Since cohesive models of learner-centered practice were understood to be pervasive throughout the

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schools, pre-service teachers were immersed in a world of “good” practice. The advisor/supervisor’s job was to encourage his or her students to look critically at what they were seeing and doing, to reflect, and to make connections between the world of these classrooms and their own personal and professional experiences.

Over the past twenty years, however, the number of students seeking certification in Reading and Literacy has expanded while the number of progressive independent schools has diminished. Moreover, in the past twenty years, the College has made an increasing commitment to public education in under-resourced schools. Consequently, not every student can be placed in a classroom that matches the kinds of educational practice espoused in courses and readings. As the schools in which students are placed serve more and more diverse learners, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is no one pedagogical model that meets the needs of all learners. Today’s teachers need to develop a much broader understanding of literacy practices. They must find ways to remain true to their fundamental values of learner-centered teaching while meaningfully incorporating a broader range of instructional strategies.

In today’s world, cooperating teachers, administrators, supervisors, and student teachers struggle together to identify and implement literacy programs that meet the needs of all learners. These realities alter the possibility of implementing a true apprenticeship model, and they raise new questions about what constitutes effective supervision for Bank Street student teachers:

If the aim of teacher education, is a reformed practice that is not readily available, and if there is no reinforcing culture to support such practice, then the basic imagery of apprenticeship seems to break down. . . . {This} creates a puzzle for reform. Through what activities and situations do teachers learn new practices that may not be routinely reinforced in the work situation. (Sykes & Bird in Putnam & Borko, 2000, p.8)

There is endless controversy in the field about the ways in which student teaching should be organized. What best prepares teachers to meet the challenges they will face in today’s urban schools: models of effective teaching or experience in extremely challenging classrooms (Watts, 1987; Zeichner, 1987). At Bank Street, the faculty are consistent in the belief that good models are essential for the preparation of good teachers. Without a concrete vision of what is possible, teachers are left to engage in isolated struggles to identify practices that support their beliefs and their goals. However, as we move away from the apprenticeship model, we are left with some uncertainty about what constitutes “good” models and what roles supervisors/advisors should play in helping students to become effective teachers.

Developing New Models

As advisors/supervisors in the field of reading and literacy, many of us hold personal and professional predilections for the Deweyan practices that have held

us in good stead for so many years. And yet, we are now finding that there are times and places when these do not suffice to meet the literacy needs of all students. Whereas Bank Street has traditionally viewed good practice and social change as interrelated goals, in many schools, these are seen as distinctly different issues. How do we move on in ways that meet the needs of all constituents?

Behavioral approaches to reading, phonics oriented instruction, even the highly structured guided reading practices that are currently dominant in many New York City schools do not in themselves help children to develop habits of critical thinking. They do not provide the kinds of experiences that will prepare them to participate effectively in a democratic society. However, they do help many children to become effective decoders and basic comprehenders of written language. These skills are essential. Our teachers need to be well versed in all methods that support such development. Yet, we are not willing to say that these accomplishments are enough.

Thus, we, as advisors/supervisors, are seeking to “move on.” Leaving behind the discourse of the familiar, we are seeking new habits of mind, new strategies, and new skills that will enable us to prepare our students to prepare their students. For this purpose, the surveys we administered to alumnae and the evaluation/feedback forms completed by students over the course of the past five years are proving to be important data sources. Asking what have they found or do they find most valuable in their fieldwork experience, we learn that alumni and student teachers consistently value advisors’/supervisors’ willingness to model instructional practices. However, they also value faculty willingness to allow students to figure things out for themselves and to make their own decisions about materials and practices. The following response is representative of many.

My advisor helped me to become a more reflective person and teacher by giving suggestions and modeling, but she also let me figure things out by questioning, thinking, discussing, taking risks. This has helped me to think more about the kids I work with; where they are, what support they need, what goals to set. (evaluation/feedback form, 1999)

Across the data sources, teachers speak of the value they place on advisors’ abilities to help them to understand, negotiate, and—ultimately—appreciate different kinds of instructional practices.

My advisor helped me to navigate and negotiate the more traditional framework of the third grade in which I was doing my fieldwork. ... Years later I came to understand how valuable this experience was. (Alumnae questionnaire, 2000)

In addition, past and current students consistently referred to the ways in which advisors helped them to integrate their personal and professional concerns.

Her focus and her knowledge were so important. But she always managed to listen to the “whole me” and what “I” was bringing to the work. (Alumni survey, 1997).

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Thus we feel affirmed that the basic premises of the advisement process developed over the years remain valid. The year long opportunity for faculty and students to work together, the ability of faculty to assume multiple roles (advisor, supervisor, facilitator), and the pervasive scaffolding of reflective practice throughout the fieldwork experience continue to be important components of teacher education at Bank Street. However, more is needed and questions remain: How do we preserve these behaviors while pushing at the boundaries of our roles, expanding our knowledge base and increasing our ability to identify advisement/supervision strategies that are more comprehensive? How do we encourage our students to value what they have accomplished but work on an ongoing basis to extend their perspectives and their repertoire of instructional strategies?

The data provides us with a point of departure for this effort. If we apply a synectic process¹ to the findings, we may be able to broaden our definitions of the roles advisors / supervisors can and should play. Analogies that seem helpful include: prospector, dramaturge, negotiator, and coach. The responsibilities of each of these figures can help us to define and redefine effective supervision.

Advisor as Prospector

As prospector, the advisor/supervisor observes, listens to, and mines what the student brings. Educationally, this role draws upon the Froebelian concept that “The purpose of teaching and instruction is to bring ever more out of man rather than to put more and more into man” (Froebel, 1889, p. 279 in Weber, 1969). The supervisor’s role is to create opportunities for the students to demonstrate and expand their ongoing knowledge of the many facets of literacy instruction. In creating these learning opportunities, the supervisor/advisor models learner centered practice, the honoring of diverse experiences, and the integration of personal and professional pools of knowledge.

It is the role of prospector that, in keeping with the vision of Froebel and Plato before him, allows the advisor/supervisor to demonstrate his or her belief in the potential that lies within each fieldwork student. Advisors / supervisors as prospector encourage fieldwork students to take risks, to figure things out, to show how much they know. It is in the role of prospector that the supervisor asks, “What do you want to learn? How do you intend to meet your goals?” In order to do this in more effective ways, it is the responsibility of the supervisor/advisor, as Prospector, to become ever more skilled at identifying the experiences and skills that comprise the valuable cultural and cognitive ore brought to classrooms by a more diverse population of fieldwork students.

Advisor as Dramaturge

A second useful analogy is that of dramaturge. In the world of the theater, a dramaturge is a dramatic production’s historian and historiographer. It is his or her role to provide information on either or both: (1) the context in which the play has

been set, e.g. what and how did people really eat in seventeenth century France or (2) the text's history in terms of how it may have been intended, produced, and interpreted at the time of its original showing as well as in subsequent times.

The supervisor/advisor as dramaturge brings his or her knowledge of the field. He or she supplements students' information about pedagogy by identifying models that have been successfully used in the field of literacy, explaining how and why they were developed, clarifying the fine points of these models, and helping students to match student needs with appropriate instructional models. The dramaturge does not tell actors or directors how to use the information but extends their understanding of what has been and what might be. Likewise, advisors/supervisors in the Reading and Literacy program do not tell their student teachers which strategies will be most effective. Instead, they offer information and then support the student teacher in his or her efforts to figure out what will work and why. As dramaturge, the reading and literature supervisor/advisor is challenged to put aside pre-existing biases regarding "best practice," deepen his or her own knowledge base of pedagogical strategies, become more conversant about the contexts within which particular strategies are most effective, and identify models in which pedagogies have been combined in order to preserve broader based educational goals.

Advisor as Coach

Going hand in hand with the role of dramaturge is the role of supervisor/advisor as coach. It is oft repeated that supervisors and teachers, like coaches, support and scaffold the growth and development of the learners with whom they work. However, athletic coaches do one thing that few supervisors and few teachers do: they tell it as it is. Good coaches, according to Grant Wiggins (2000), do not hedge. Good coaches are fair; they praise learners' accomplishments. However, they are also honest. They let learners know what the mark is, where they stand in relation to that mark, and what they have to do in order to come closer. If the learners' efforts have not taken them where they need to be—no matter how great the effort has been or how significant the accomplishment—the progress is honored but the remaining disparity is made clear.

We are discovering that effective supervisors/advisors like effective coaches help student teachers to recognize not only what they know but what they need to learn and/or to practice. This responsibility is particularly challenging for many advisors/supervisors. It involves giving close scrutiny to and challenging many of the beliefs and practices that have become safe and comfortable. That is not to say the beliefs and practices are not rightly valued, but that they have some unanticipated, complicating implications. For example, many advisors/supervisors pride themselves on being "nurturing"; "nurturing", they define, as emphasizing the positive, avoiding the negative. It is often difficult to be both nurturing and candid.

Secondly, advisors/supervisors at Bank Street, build on a tradition of inquiry. Steeped in this pedagogy, we have a tendency to avoid direct instruction. In so

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doing, it is possible that we may over generalize the discovery process. Desiring that students construct their own visions of effective practice, advisors/supervisors are often hesitant to give direct instructions. Frequently this instructional “space” does enable students to figure things out as testified to in our data sources. However, there are times when this practice leaves students floundering without the skills they need to meet their own goals.

Thirdly, believing that the learning process should be collaborative and generative, advisors/supervisors eschew traditional supervisory tools such as checklists. Instead, a process of observation and recording is used as a basis for post observation conferences. In many ways, this process works well in the context of institutional goals. However, it means that feedback may be somewhat idiosyncratic, not always incorporating a vocabulary that is common throughout course experiences, readings, and/or other facets of the teacher education program. The absence of clear and consistent terminology was less important when students were being encultured into a world of shared belief systems and shared practices through the aforementioned apprenticeship models (Putnam & Borko, 2000). However, as the students and teachers with whom we work become more diverse, there can be less certainty that implicit meaning is shared meaning. In the complexities of today’s world, it is essential that teachers and students have an accurate sense of where they stand in relation to the goals they set. As coaches, the supervisory challenge is not only to generate probing questions but to find mechanisms that facilitate clarity of communication.

Advisor as Negotiator

Finally, we can make an analogy between the role of the advisor / supervisor and that of Negotiator. Martha Nussbaum speaks of the need for each member of a diverse society to be willing “to doubt the goodness of one’s own way” (Nussbaum, 1997, p62). However, sometimes one or both parties are unwilling to engage in the doubting process. Sometimes the cooperating teacher or the student teacher passionately believes that there is only one possible way to help children become literate members of society. The cooperating teacher may refuse to provide the student teacher with time and space to experiment with different approaches. The student teacher, newly developing an understanding of progressive pedagogy, may be resistant to exploring more traditional strategies used in many classrooms. Conversely, student teachers who are committed to models of direct teaching may be unable to identify, respect, and learn to incorporate the more hidden structures of a progressive classroom.

In these instances, it is the responsibility of the advisor/supervisor to don the hat of negotiator, a person who, according to the Random House unabridged dictionary, “moves through, around, or over in a satisfactory manner”(1966, p957). The advisor/supervisor first endeavors to facilitate dialogue between the teacher and cooperating teacher, dialogue that engenders in each participant respect for and

understanding of the beliefs and practices of the other. Sometimes, however, this outcome cannot be achieved; then the advisor/supervisor works to circumvent the impasse. In the first case, he or she works to carve out space for the student teacher to have meaningful teaching experiences. In the latter, he or she negotiates between the student teacher's current thinking and the existing classroom practices. As the scope of fieldwork placements becomes broader, advisors/supervisors will be required to become increasingly adept at "working" the situation.

Conclusion

Together, these roles contribute to the development of a consistent, cohesive support system for supporting progressive teachers seeking to apply their knowledge and beliefs in the context of today's classrooms. In each of these roles advisors/supervisors help students to reflect on their own practice, to know what they know, and to identify what they need to learn. However, what differentiates these advisement behaviors from past ones is that they are more conscious and more systematic.

In all of these, the conference group, the weekly seminar of fieldwork students, plays an important role facilitating advisors'/supervisors' ability to develop an appropriate balance between presenting information and supporting student teachers' construction of knowledge (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Working together, the conference group creates a mini-discourse community in which fieldwork students support, question, and—in essence—supervise each other. Through this collective process of advisement/supervision, members of the group contribute to their colleagues' construction of the role of literacy teacher as they struggle to construct their own vision and pedagogy. And, as they do so their questions and comments help advisors/supervisors to pose new questions, to gather new information, and ultimately to broaden their own perspectives. Added to the roles of the faculty member as supervisor, advisor, facilitator is one other—colleague and co-constructor of knowledge. Thus, the successful conference group parallels the successful classroom in which teachers and students learn with and through each other. Ultimately, the success of field experience as a medium for effecting a bridge between the Reading and Literacy Program and the complex worlds of classrooms and schools depends on the ability of the advisor / supervisor / facilitator to scaffold the teacher's learning in ways that enable interpretation and reinterpretation that draws on the learner's experience and developing understandings of other perspectives.

Note

¹ Synectics refers to a brainstorming process developed by Gordon in which similes are used to broaden one's understandings and perceptions of the targeted term. In this case, the sentence prompt would be 'A supervisor is like ____.'

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