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Advisement and Collaboration

Maureen A. Hornung, Ariel Katz, and Claire Wurtzel

The Advisor's Perspective

During the 1988-89 academic year, my special education advisement group included four head teachers, one student teacher, and an intern. In conference group, advisees shared dilemmas and problems as well as joys and triumphs. They questioned each other's assumptions, problem solved, and brought materials and ideas to the group. During the first semester of advisement, Ariel and Maureen, two of my advisees, got to know each other's teaching skills, their styles and concerns; there was also mutual respect and confidence in each other's abilities. One of them had two years' classroom experience and a strong curriculum base, but was interested in developing a more productive relationship with students. The other was a first-year teacher with a background in business management who lacked experience in curriculum development, but was talented in creating a strong rapport with the students. A collaboration emerged between Maureen and Ariel in the spring semester of advisement.

Maureen was the head teacher in an inner-city special education school for extremely disturbed adolescents. Ariel, an intern in an alternative elementary school resource room, volunteered to work in Maureen's class on her free day.

Maureen was a career-change person who came to Bank Street College from the business world. She had also had ten years' prior experience as a community worker in a drug program and had participated in conferences worldwide on the

Maureen A. Hornung, a dual degree student, has completed Bank Street's Special Education Program and is completing her MSW at Columbia University. Ms. Hornung is currently a counselor and outreach specialist working with at-risk junior high school students in the Bank Street's Liberty Partnership Program.

Ariel Katz is a special needs teacher in Tavistock, England. As an itinerant resource room teacher, she works with 5- to 13-year-olds in four schools—one junior high school and three feeder elementary schools. Ms. Katz works with the students individually and in small groups; she has been working collaboratively with two mainstream teachers, teaching in their classrooms.

Claire Wurtzel is an advisor and instructor in the Special Education Program at Bank Street College.

therapeutic process. Her past experiences and intuition served her well in the classroom. She was extremely successful in getting students to connect with her; using humor, she guided them away from their prior behavior, which was often self-defeating. Maureen was strong and clear. She did not need to control or "win" in conflict situations. If she was anxious, it didn't show. Mature and serene, she managed to develop a warm, safe, and optimistic atmosphere in the classroom that gave students the security they needed.

Maureen believed in learning through active participation in meaningful curriculum but felt she lacked experience. Her course work at Bank Street exposed her to new ways of teaching and learning, but she had no role models to learn from and felt unsure of her ability to improve her teaching skills. Although she had been successful in engaging students in many creative learning experiences—including a play and an in-class store and bank—she was not convinced she had included enough skill development in her curriculum.

Ariel had a deep understanding of different cultures, which had been nurtured in her travels and teaching in the Middle East. Although her field placement, a four-day-a-week internship in a resource room, was valuable she was eager for more of a challenge. Her thoughtful, searching mind and good insights were matched by her active interest in teaching materials and curriculum. She understood how to construct curriculum that provided developmentally appropriate experiences for students. Ariel also knew how to adjust existing curricula to match the interests and abilities of the students. She was a flexible thinker and an adventurous person who wanted to improve her management skills. She was particularly interested in learning to use more humor and, in general, be more relaxed in the use of her authority role with children.

I always encourage advisees to visit each other and, in the late fall, Ariel visited Maureen's class and was intrigued. Among other things, she was impressed with Maureen's ability to diffuse students' anger through the use of humor and to offer them alternative options for conflict resolution. I encouraged a collaboration because I thought it would give them each a wonderful opportunity to practice teaching strategies in the presence of a supportive peer. They had common interests: a shared optimism in the student's potential and the desire to improve their own practice as teachers. In addition, their teaching styles and strengths complemented each other.

They worked together throughout the spring semester. The advisement process helped to shape the collaboration. Biweekly conferences supported them individually. I worked toward helping them increase their knowledge of themselves and each other, being careful with issues of confidentiality and communication, and I helped clarify and define issues and feelings as they arose. In conference group, Ariel and Maureen shared their exhilarating and frustrating

moments. Peer support was an important aspect of their work. It gave them the courage to take new risks. Three-way conferences held in my office helped to improve their relationship. These meetings created a neutral arena to problem solve and clear the air. It was quite a challenge for these two teachers to be both observer and observed as they tried out new techniques.

I also observed them together in Maureen's classroom. It was an exciting day when they made a gingerbread house with the students. I was very moved by the intimacy in the classroom—all these "tough kids" were excitedly working together creating the house!

I rode to school with them that day and witnessed their excitement as they anticipated and continued to plan what would happen in the class. During the ride home, they openly evaluated each other's performance. These two teachers proved able to teach and learn together in ways that were impressive. Their communication was in the context of equals working on common problems—two strong teachers learning to share authority and responsibility for students' learning.

My positive response to their work spurred them on to write about their collaboration. They wrote the following piece collaboratively and individually.

About the Collaboration

In the beginning of the spring semester, we met with our advisor and it was agreed that we would work together every Friday in Maureen's eighth-grade class of severely emotionally disabled students at an inner-city school in the South Bronx. The class roster was in constant flux throughout the year; only two children who entered the class in September stayed the entire year, though there were between six and twelve students on the roster at different points during the year. Even the children that remained on the roster for the majority of the year would skip school at least once a week or were suspended from time to time. Because there was no continuity in the student body from one week to the next, planning and presenting lessons was extremely difficult.

Since we were together in the classroom only once a week, we recognized the need to contact each other periodically during the week and to analyze new developments in classroom dynamics. Generally, we met on Sunday afternoons to plan the following week's lessons and to develop a specific aspect of the long-term curriculum. We would discuss in detail what would occur on the following Friday, deciding who would initiate each activity and who would be responsible for obtaining the necessary materials. We overcame the obstacles one by one as they surfaced (because we were not prepared for many of them) by discussing them between teaching periods and further exploring them at our weekly meetings. We were able to tackle these challenges by maintaining an open

communication with the support of our advisor.

We discussed our initial concerns from the onset, which included the alteration of the classroom dynamic. The addition of a new person was a potentially explosive and disruptive situation, since the children were distrustful of others, extremely territorial, and volatile. The first order was for the introduction of the new teacher. It was important that the students saw us as a team because of their respect for their teacher and their suspicion of any unfamiliar adults. For the success of this program, it was imperative that Ariel be viewed as a trusted member of the classroom environment.

The children were prepared in advance for her arrival. The next concern was the distribution of authority within the classroom. How would the new teacher be seen, and what role would she have in class decisions? Our final concern was how our partnership would be viewed by the paraprofessional in the room, as well as the other staff in the school. Since the children were used to group discussions, this forum was used to introduce the idea. Maureen wanted them to feel as much a part of the decision as possible, which was consistent with how her classroom operated.

We chose to include the poetry workshop, treasure hunt, cooking, and graphing as examples of how working together enriched the curriculum and enhanced our own teaching capabilities.

Poetry Workshop

The first piece of curriculum we chose to develop was a poetry workshop that included the reading and analysis of poems as well as the writing of original works. The purpose of the poetry workshop was to introduce a short yet evocative form of writing that the children could read and discuss and later incorporate in their own writing. Because the reading skills of the class ranged from about a second-grade to sixth-grade level, poetry offered a concise yet stimulating writing form from which to draw material. We chose poems that were particularly relevant to this adolescent population. Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou were the principal poets whose works we explored in a series of workshops designed to investigate the structure of poetry and the emotional issues inherent in these poems. In an effort to attract the student to this art form, we compared the rhythm and rhyme of poetry with their own rap music. Once engaged, the students became competent in analyzing poems and recognizing form, metaphor, simile, and meter. As a result of the workshops, the children became comfortable and confident enough to write their own poems.

We developed the curriculum around the interests and needs of the students, giving them a forum to express highly charged emotional issues with which they were currently struggling, such as drug and child abuse. Through

collaboration, we were able to draw from our own personal experiences. The joining of our ideas created a rich and varied curriculum. It also allowed for the introduction of two individual approaches to looking at a given material. The students not only learned from the teachers, but we learned from the students as well as from each other.

The workshop ran for a month of Fridays and became a useful model for future projects. We chose a specific subject area and brainstormed for possible relevant activities. Once we decided on a direction, we organized the material and delegated responsibilities based on our individual strengths in an effort to best present the material. Through our discussions of how to proceed, we questioned each other's choices and suggestions to better understand the methodologies we were each employing. It became a way of clarifying our ideologies—to ourselves as well as to each other—and of entertaining other points of view.

Treasure Hunt

On Fridays, Maureen liked to have a fun activity for the children in order to send them home for the weekend on a positive note. She mentioned a treasure hunt as something that she was interested in doing. This fit into our measurement curriculum, since we had to map the room and measure paces. Ariel wanted to work reading and cooperation into the treasure hunt in addition to the mathematical aspect. First, we cut the map into as many pieces as there were children. Knowing that these children had difficulty working together, Ariel planned that the beginning of the exercise would be independent, and as they got invested in the activity through discovering their piece by themselves, they would be ready to join as a group to put the whole map together.

We gave each student written directions to a hidden piece of map. Once they had found their piece of map, they had to wait for or help the others to find their part. They had to cooperate and re-create the original map in order to see where the treasure was hidden by relating the symbols on the map to objects in the room. It worked out beautifully. The children were highly motivated to read and follow directions with precision. They participated in fitting the pieces together and analyzing the map. One boy, who was on the lowest level academically, made the connection between the map symbol and the corresponding location in the room. He ran to the table, slid under it, and grabbed the bag of caramel popcorn that was secured there. His pride and group spirit were expressed by his wide smile and generosity as he opened the bag and shared it with his classmates.

After they had uncovered the treasure, Maureen had an idea that would give the children the opportunity to pace out a map, so that they would experience the designing as well as the reading of directions and maps. She suggested that

they hide map pieces and pace out directions for the teachers. They were all easily motivated. They chose a location to hide their map piece, and paced out and documented directions from the door to that location. Most of the directions were nondirect, circuitous routes, which revealed their playful and flexible thinking.

The activity incorporated at least three subject areas: math, language arts, and social awareness. The treasure hunt is a prime example of how we bounced ideas off of each other, expanding and building the lessons as we went along.

Cooking

We started the cooking program by making chocolate chip cookies. Even the most hyperactive and hypoactive children were invested immediately. They had little concept of measuring solids and liquids, but were eager to experiment and accept guidance. After we had made and devoured the cookies, one of the boys mentioned that he wanted to make gingerbread. We looked at each other, perplexed and not terribly interested in gingerbread. After a private discussion, we agreed to pick up on the student's cue and expand it to include our curriculum on measurement by attempting to make a gingerbread house.

In preparation, we had the kids construct houses out of manila paper. Neither of us had ever made a gingerbread house, so we began to research the idea. Ariel provided the technique for making it and Maureen obtained a pattern. Maureen worked with a small group rolling and cutting the dough, while Ariel worked with the remaining children discussing measurement and fractions in relation to the materials being used. We also challenged the children to find a way to fit all the pieces of the pattern on one cookie sheet, which called for analytical skills and spatial awareness. They enjoyed this puzzle.

After cooking the pieces, the children were asked to construct the house, deciding which pieces functioned best as side, front, back, and roof. Through discussion and problem solving, they worked together to raise the house, relying on each other to support the various pieces, using frosting as the cement. The house stood for one second of glory then collapsed because the frosting's consistency was too thin. We focused on the success of the project—that they had completed the task, and the fallen house was begging to be eaten—yet the children's hearts sagged from the weight of the collapsed house, feeling disappointment. This was short-lived once we dug in and enjoyed the house in a different way.

Graphing

Maureen took the concept of mathematical averages from a textbook and decided to make it relevant to the children by having them average their weekly scores from an existing schoolwide behavior management point system. The kids

could see in a real way the function of averaging and its application in their everyday life. When Ariel came in on Friday, she showed the kids how to graph their averages by means of line graphs and bar graphs. A homework sheet was made up for them where they had to read a hypothetical graph about the class and answer questions pertaining to the contents of the graph. The kids became very competent and tracked incline, decline, and stability by comparing averages over several weeks. The highlight was when Donnie said, "Mine escalated. . . you know, went up!" Donnie seemed to have combined the words accelerated and escalated to describe the movement of the graph. We learned a new word that day.

Maureen expanded the graphing by applying it to a lesson on surveying and tracking results. The kids chose questions, surveyed classmates, and graphed the outcome. They discovered new information about each other, such as favorite rap songs, female vocalist, type of music, and even who liked to kiss. They were empowered by their newly acquired skill in applying what they considered to be a very sophisticated method of presenting information. The kids commented to each other, "This is like high school math!" They were proud of their work and were eager to display their completed surveys.

Allowing the children to experience the concept in many ways gave them confidence and an understanding of the material that led to a wonderful feeling of success. By playing off the interests and ideas of the group, we were able to create an integrated math curriculum that was dynamic and exciting, and that bolstered the children's self-esteem as well.

Reflections

Ariel

Collaborative teaching is stimulating, empowering, and supportive at best, but it can also be draining when the communication between the teachers is less than clear. Inevitably, teachers will have conflicting views about how to handle certain situations and which goals should be prioritized. At the beginning of our work together, I was often confused about whether I was helping or hindering, whether I was accepted or just being humored. Sometimes I would break an unwritten class rule that I had not been aware of; as an outsider, I was in a precarious position. Towards the end of the year, after these issues had been discussed, I felt much better about my role and the work that we did together. Though fully rewarding, cooperative teaching is a delicate business, and it is important to realize the implications from the start. When I co-taught, I learned more about compromise and diplomacy than I ever did teaching alone. These are things we want to instill in our children and which we expect them to do every

day; yet usually, we, as teachers, have the last word. When teaching is done cooperatively, the classroom environment more closely resembles the democracy for which we are educating our children.

In individual conferences with my advisor, I was able to express my frustrations and disappointments that I didn't want to impose on Maureen. These discussions enabled me to accept myself and my work. My perfectionist nature kept me ever critical of our work. My advisor helped me to see my half-empty glass as being half full, which gave me the strength to continue the collaboration. Three-way meetings with Claire, Maureen, and myself helped to iron out any communication difficulties we were having in a comfortable setting.

The single most important thing I learned from Maureen was: Never enter into a power struggle with the kids, always come at them from their side. Once, when one boy was misbehaving and picked up the intercom phone, I watched to see how Maureen would tell him to put it down. When she noticed what he was up to, she got him to replace the receiver immediately by calmly saying, "Ernie, order me a pizza."

Maureen

The kids' major reservations about Ariel's joining our class were centered around how trustworthy Ariel would be and what type of power she would be able to exercise over them. "Can she tell us what to do?" and "What if she tells on us?" were some of their concerns. I assured them that I had worked with her and felt that she was very much interested in helping kids and that, in return, we could help her by sharing our experiences as a group. They responded well to the reciprocity of the situation, feeling surprised yet pleased that they had something to offer.

Ariel recognized that her manner appeared confrontational and challenging to the kids; she was unsure of her role and expressed concern about intervening in discipline problems. This was a problem since the kids could manipulate situations to their benefit and, potentially, to their harm. We resolved this problem by reviewing situations and discussing the "why and hows" of our reactions and resolutions. I was torn between my allegiance to the kids and my responsibility to Ariel and sometimes felt that I was asking too much of the kids. Over time, she gained the kids' respect and they began to see her as part of the class.

Next, we had to address general concerns regarding shared curriculum, disappointment over failed projects, scheduling conflicts, and understanding different styles of teaching and interacting. In addition, it was imperative that there exist a clear line of communication between us in the classroom. We discussed problems immediately—during break periods, lunch time, or prep

time—which was crucial, since classroom order always took precedence over planned curriculum, private agendas, special projects, and our personal needs.

The most beneficial aspect of our collaboration was the enhancement of curriculum; the most difficult was the control and classroom management. The impact of another adult who moves through the day with the kids allows you to focus on the job of teaching. The luxury of having an individual who can participate in and understand your decisions, frustrations, and successes is enormously enriching. It alleviates the isolation and encourages feedback, which is critical for growth and productivity as a professional.

Ariel came to this project with specific strengths and experiences. As a first year teacher, I welcomed her presence and input. I felt strongly about the importance of cooperative teaching and a team approach as a result of my business experience. Ariel's ability to develop a lesson contributed to the success of each project.

The conference group proved to be a supportive place to talk about the successes, problems, and turmoil I experienced teaching in a difficult setting with no prior teaching experience. Without the support of individual conferences and the group, I am certain that I would have left the field of education. ♦