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NORMALIZING THE NEED FOR HELP: WHAT ALL TEACHERS NEED

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When I joined the graduate faculty at Bank Street College, I arrived with years of experience in the field of teacher education. I was quite anxious, nevertheless, about starting this new job. Would I be able to meet the complex needs of a group of as yet unknown students? Would I earn the respect of colleagues, most of whom were still strangers to me, as I embarked on this new phase of my career?

During my first year at Bank Street, waves of self-doubt washed over me as I tried to acclimate to my new surroundings. I reflected on my teaching style and ways of relating to students—developed over more than two decades in public colleges—and I wondered if they would really fit into the Bank Street culture. Was I qualified to teach “O & R” (a course focused on observing, recording, and analyzing children’s behavior), with its intimidating reputation as one of the cornerstones of the Graduate School program? What exactly was the role of an advisor working with students in Supervised Fieldwork? I knew through conversations with faculty and the background material I had read that the role was different from the one I had played in other institutions. But it was not clear to me exactly what I should (or should not) be doing when making field visits to my six advisees, nor what role I should play during the weekly two-hour conference group with these same students. Over time, and with support, however, I began to feel more at home. Then, at the beginning of my second year, I became a program director, and self-doubt recurred. One of my new responsibilities was to hold monthly meetings with faculty advisors to provide ongoing support in their work with students. The advisors with whom I would be meeting had served in this role far longer than I. Would I be able to meet their needs and secure their confidence?

I was reminded of these worries when I considered responding to the “Call for Papers” for *The First Years Out*. I wanted to write about the work that I had done as an evaluator for a project on helping new teachers. As I began to think about the approach I would take, I continued to reflect on my experiences as a newcomer to Bank Street.

The call became an opportunity to explore the connections between my own most recent experiences as a newcomer and what all new teachers need in order to succeed.

Clearly the need to nurture new teachers has become a critical challenge at a time when as many as fifty percent of those entering the profession leave within the first five years (McCarren, 2000). In response, many innovative programs have been designed to assist new teachers during their first years in the classroom. One such program is the New Educators Support Team (NEST), which was funded by AOL Time Warner, and launched in 1999 in a limited number of New York City public schools. As a demonstration project, it set out to develop a carefully planned program of activities to supplement those already offered within the participating schools by NEST's sponsoring organizations.¹ AOL Time Warner also provided funds for Bank Street College to conduct an independent evaluation of the project during its first three years.² That evaluation identified critical components of NEST that contributed to its effectiveness in supporting new teachers—components that were very much in keeping with the literature on effective professional development and school change.

The first part of this paper briefly describes these components. The balance focuses on a perspective about new-teacher supports that emerged from the evaluation. That perspective, which can be characterized as “normalizing the need for help,” points to the logic of firmly situating new-teacher support programs within a broader context of ongoing professional development.

Critical Components of a Teacher Support Program

From its inception, NEST concerned itself with school change. A NEST Advisory Committee was formed, composed of representatives from all of NEST's sponsoring organizations, which included prominent advocates of school reform. In addition, at various times during its first three years, members of the National School Reform Faculty (www.nsrffharmony.org) served as consultants to the project. Thus, NEST positioned itself to deliberately infuse sound principles regarding professional development and school change into the development of a new-teacher support program.

One such principle points to the need to foster professional communities in which learning together is a common aim. Glatthorn and Fox (1996) talk about a professional culture in which “...all members of the organization have internalized the school's mission, have in common a vision of excellence for that school and work together towards shared goals” (p.16). McDonald (1992) notes the essential difference such a culture made in his own life as a teacher, describing a time when after eight years

of classroom teaching he arrived at a new school where he found that "...collegiality was the norm," and where he "...first had access to practice other than my own" (p.10).

The NEST evaluation data was drawn from focus groups, interviews, surveys, and direct observation of NEST activities. In the process of listening to both new and experienced teachers and analyzing the feedback that they provided in these various forums, it was possible to tease out critical elements of NEST's approach. Central to this approach was promoting professional communities within the schools and using these as the avenue through which support activities would be offered to new teachers.

At the beginning of the first year, for example, experienced classroom teachers from New York City public schools were hired by NEST to serve as site facilitators in the participating schools. One of their first undertakings was to set up school committees made up of administrators, experienced teachers, and new teachers. These committees were charged with working together to plan a host of activities that would support new teachers over the course of the entire year. Although the NEST committees operated in different ways in different schools, the intention was to create a collaborative, non-hierarchical, advisory body to plan the new-teacher program for the school—a body that would afford neophytes a voice in planning alongside their more experienced colleagues. Lieberman and Miller (1999) point out that there are certain "... fundamentals of school improvement, working with people rather than working on them, building collaboration and cooperation, sharing leadership functions with a team so that people can provide complementary skills and get experience in role taking, and organizing school improvement activities around a focus" (pp. 82-83).

In addition, during the first three years of the project, the NEST site facilitators worked to ensure that there would be a choice of activities made available to teachers without mandating participation; all of these were collaborative, non-hierarchical, and non-evaluative in structure. A variety of group meetings and workshops was offered. The site facilitators also made themselves available to meet individually with new and experienced teachers and/or to visit their classrooms in order to observe or to model classroom practice. The site facilitators were able to build trust by providing help that was highly valued by teachers, some of whom came to see the site facilitators as their confidantes and advocates, knowing that the problems they discussed together would be considered confidential. Furthermore, and again in keeping with principles of school reform, NEST individualized its approach, recognizing that each school has its own culture and each teacher her or his own needs.

While a menu of group and individual activities was made available in the participating schools, no two schools opted for all of the same choices. An example of an activity chosen by some schools was the establishment or continuation of existing

Critical Friends Groups, a structured approach to collegial support to which all teachers were welcome. These groups met regularly to foster dialogue regarding student work, and made use of the Tuning Protocol originally developed by the Coalition for Essential Schools (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999). At one such meeting, it was observed that a new teacher presenting her students' work was afforded considerable respect by her colleagues. Following the Tuning Protocol, when she finished her presentation, the others asked clarifying questions and then provided "warm and cool feedback." This included sharing their own experiences without lecturing or sounding like experts trying to "fix" what went wrong. At the end of the meeting, even the teachers with more experience expressed appreciation for insights they gained about their own work.

Another example of a frequently selected NEST activity, highly valued by the teachers in the participating schools, was the opportunity to meet individually and informally with the Site Facilitator and more experienced colleagues within their school. What came through in the focus groups was that new teachers in particular appreciated the offers of support that came in response to their expressed needs. They felt that this kind of support was more valuable than pre-planned workshops on topics selected in advance by administrators or staff developers.

At the end of the second year and throughout the third year, NEST worked on building the capacity of the participating schools to provide a rich program of new-teacher support activities that would continue when NEST was no longer present. This was done by training experienced teachers to provide peer coaching, which is by definition a confidential process (Robbins, 1991). The plan was for these coach-teachers to eventually take over responsibilities of the NEST site facilitators, and they were chosen from among teachers who had participated in NEST activities in the first and second year of the project. The choice to use teachers rather than administrators or staff developers was intended to safeguard NEST's non-hierarchical, non-evaluative approach. This, in turn, was intended to ease the way for new teachers to talk freely about problems they encountered and ask for help without feeling that they would jeopardize their jobs.

Normalizing the Need for Help

Towards the end of its third year, NEST held a meeting for school administrators and coach teachers to work on planning the new-teacher support program for the following year. As I listened in on a small group discussion, I heard one of the coaches—someone with more than twenty years of classroom experience—mention that she deliberately told new teachers that there were times when she, too, needed help. It struck me that her message could be characterized as normalizing the need for help.

This captured much of what NEST was striving for—to support new teachers by firmly grounding its program within a collegial framework of ongoing professional development.

During each of the three years, both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered to inform the evaluation. Questionnaires were distributed to new teachers in all NEST sites to document demographic information about respondents, the NEST activities in which they participated, and perceptions regarding their career trajectories. In addition, during each year of the evaluation, focus groups were held with experienced teachers to ascertain what new teachers needed and NEST's success in addressing those needs. Interviews were conducted with site facilitators (three to six experienced classroom teachers who were hired during each year of the project and charged with facilitating staff development activities in the participating schools). Comments such as the following throughout the focus groups and interviews clearly corroborated the value of normalizing the need for help: "Our school...is definitely part of the NEST team..." "All of us are coaching all the time, in many different ways...sometimes informally, sometimes formally," "But I think that teachers are hired with the understanding that this is the type of school where people will be helping you," "This is the culture of the school" (coach-teacher), "In my school there's a culture of 'help out the new teacher,'" "There are a lot of experienced teachers in my school and everybody helps out everybody else" (new teacher).

The value of normalizing the need for help resonated deeply and stirred memories of the self-doubt I experienced when I first arrived at Bank Street. It became increasingly clear to me that a major reason why self-doubt abated as I moved through my first year was the many opportunities for "colleague-ship," both informal and formal, that were available at the college. While I realize that not every newcomer to Bank Street necessarily encounters the same offers of support, there are formal structures for providing assistance, as well as a culture in which people talk about their work when they meet by chance in the hallway or cafeteria.

As I began to plan the course on observing and recording children's behavior, for example, a colleague offered her course outline and handouts. Without my asking, she urged me to make use of them as I chose. She also gave me pointers about managing the onslaught of weekly observation assignments that I would be receiving, and made herself available throughout the semester to answer my many questions. She even offered to assist me in a class session during which students needed to receive individual feedback from the instructor while the others worked in small groups.

During that first year I encountered two formally structured support activities related to the highly individualized advisement process, which often feels elusive and

hard to grasp. The first consists of one-on-one monthly meetings between advisors and their program directors. While these meetings serve a dual purpose—providing support to the advisor and keeping the Program Director informed about student progress—they can at times feel stilted, particularly when there are no burning issues or problems to address. A second, often more dynamic means of support for advisors are the monthly meetings facilitated by a senior faculty member. New faculty are required to attend these meetings, but many faculty, even those with decades of experience, continue to participate. Run much like the groups for students, there are no set agendas; instead, the faculty advisors use the time to raise the issues and problems they are grappling with in their work with their advisees. The meetings are confidential—what is said in the room is supposed to stay in the room—and are an excellent vehicle for professional development. Both new and experienced faculty have the opportunity to learn from each other in a non-threatening situation. Program directors and college administrators do not attend.

The Need for Help as a Professional Tenet

By the end of my first year at Bank Street, I began to settle into a feeling of “belonging,” which came with the implicit message that it is normal to need help. I actually found myself seeking help from many different people (peers and administrators), rather than from just one or two trusted colleagues, as I had in past jobs. Then in my second year, when my responsibilities as a program director required that I provide advisors with support, I was thrown into a renewed state of disequilibrium. It felt presumptuous to be offering help to colleagues whose tenure at Bank Street was far longer than mine. But once again, both informal and formal assistance were available. Informally, I talked at length to a colleague with whom I had reversed roles. She had been my program director the previous year, but because she had chosen to step out of this role, I was now hers. She volunteered to provide me with coaching about my new job and helped me see that supporting advisors in their work with advisees was a process that mirrored my work with advisees the year before. In addition, I also met monthly with the chair of my department. These one-on-one meetings were similar to the open-ended conference groups and individual conferences that advisors conduct with their advisees. Although they contained an implicit evaluative component, the primary focus was for me to raise issues and seek support.

Thus, my experience at Bank Street readied me to hear and to deeply appreciate the implicit message from that coach-teacher cited above, and also to appreciate its connection to the mission of NEST—to promote a culture in which new and experienced teachers work together as a “community of learners.” This term, community of learners,

emerged out of the literature on school reform some time ago, but seems especially apt with respect to normalizing the need for help. Lieberman & Miller (1999) describe a community of learners by referring to what Donald Schon calls “an epistemology of practice that is...passed teacher to teacher as part of the lore of teaching” (p.63). Glatthorn & Fox (1996) say that a learning community is “pervasively influenced by a learning-centered culture, which manifests itself in certain values and their related norms” (p.15). McDonald (1992) extends the perimeters of the learning community beyond school walls by reminding us that we can also turn to teacher-writers whom we may never have met, and even become teacher-writers ourselves, in order to deepen our understanding of our work.³

Thus, the term “community of learners” conveys an essential message that teachers must continue to learn throughout their professional lives, and can best do so with the support of colleagues—a worthy message for new teachers to receive. But how should it be conveyed so that its truth is experienced directly? Is it enough for new teachers to be thrust into collaborating with colleagues when they arrive at a school for the first time? McDonald (1992) suggests that this may not be adequate, because there are administrators and teachers whose implicit aim is to transform bad teachers into good teachers, rather than to create opportunities for true collaborations. In the process, they end up putting new teachers into situations where it may be preferable to “avoid reflection and collegiality in order to avoid revealing to themselves and others whether they are good or bad” (p. 21).

Palmer (1998) speaks to this issue, as well, when he says that the kind of community needed in education is more than a therapeutic community, which strives for intimacy, or a civic community where “we deal with differences through the classic mechanisms of democratic politics...” (p.92). What is needed, according to Palmer, is “a space in which the community of truth is practiced...”(p.90). Thus, the value to new teachers of explicitly normalizing the need for help is that it is a truthful induction into what it means to be a teacher. For, if truth be told, we know that no matter how long we have been in the profession, we continue to encounter problems and questions that are formidable and that are far better addressed with others than in isolation. Palmer wants us to think of ourselves as knowers, studying a subject together, rather than a hierarchically divided group made up of experts who help amateurs to know some object in a pure way. Furthermore, he cautions us to approach the community of truth with humility; it is “an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline” (p.104).

Writing this essay has given me the opportunity to better understand why NEST’s approach to supporting new teachers resonated so deeply with me when I

thought about my experiences as a newcomer to Bank Street. Not only did NEST strive to create and support learning communities within the participating schools; it deemed new teachers' needs for support no more or less important than the support that all teachers need in order to meet the continuing challenges they face in their professional lives. NEST did, indeed, normalize the need for help in a way that empowered experienced teachers to take initiative in changing their school culture, and in reaching out to new teachers with the invitation, "Come learn with me."

What stands in the way of the universal adoption of such communities in schools? There is certainly no simple answer to this question. Schools, like corporations, are typically structured with much of the decision-making power in the hands of a few administrators whose high status is defined by impressive titles and the salaries that go along with them. Although those at the top may at times opt to collaborate with those in lower-status positions, they are not obliged to do so. Nor are they likely to invite collaboration in regard to all the decisions they face.

My experience at Bank Street, with its connection to the outcomes of the NEST evaluation, points to the value of providing non-hierarchical support that strengthens teachers' abilities to develop continuously as professionals. Perhaps it is Bank Street's historic commitment to democratic principles that accounts for its ability to offer this kind of support. (NEST's commitment was clearly derived from the literature on school change.) But school administrators who are authorized to make top-down decisions will not necessarily be inclined to forego this authority when it comes to staff development, unless there is something in their own experience that they can draw upon to understand the value of group decision-making. Involving school administrators in non-hierarchical support activities may be one important route through which they can come to appreciate the power of learning communities in furthering their own work. Then administrators, too, can experience for themselves the power of normalizing the need for help.

End Notes

¹ With funding from AOL Time Warner, NEST was sponsored during its first two years by New York Network for School Renewals (NYNSR), a consortium of organizations committed to school reform, including New Visions for Public Schools, Center for Collaborative Education, ACORN, and the Center for Educational Innovation. The New York City Department of Education (then known as the Board of Education) and the United Federation of Teachers collaborated with NYNSR in sponsoring NEST. In its third year, NEST moved to New York University's Steinhardt School of Education.

² While AOL Time Warner funded Bank Street to conduct an independent evaluation of NEST during its first three years, the views that are expressed here are solely the author's.

³ It should be noted that most of the references cited in this essay come from books that NEST distributed to new and experienced teachers who participated in the project.

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