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The Early Years of the Advisement Program at Bank Street College

Claudia Lewis

The Cooperative School for Student Teachers, a part of the Bureau of Educational Experiments—later known as Bank Street College of Education—in its first year of training teachers down at 69 Bank Street (1931-32) was dealing with just a handful of students, no more than fifteen. For several years, in the thirties, this situation prevailed, though there was a gradual increase in enrollment each year.

During those early years there was no student advisement program as exists today, and probably little need for it was felt. The student teachers were placed for practice teaching in a small group of private, progressive schools, schools that were eager to have students from this new experimental training institution that Lucy Sprague Mitchell had started and directed in the old Fleischman Yeast building on Bank Street. Furthermore, each student teacher remained in her one school for the entire year, learning how to be comfortable and competent in that situation. Though she moved from one age level to another during the year, she had only that one school's atmosphere to adjust to, and all of the children were, like herself, middle class. The director of each school was available to help the student teacher with any questions or problems. (I am using the feminine pronoun because male students were very few.)

Claudia Lewis is an anthropologist and Distinguished Scholar in Children's Literature Emerita at Bank Street. She began her association with the College as a student in the School for Teachers in Bank Street's second year of training teachers, 1932-1933, under the direction of Lucy Sprague Mitchell. After several years of teaching children, Dr. Lewis joined the faculty in 1943. She has taught courses (including Language and Literature, formerly taught by Mrs. Mitchell), advised students, and worked in the divisions of Research and Publications. At present, as an adjunct faculty member, she teaches courses in children's creative writing and cross-cultural studies of children, and works with the Publications Group. Dr. Lewis is the author of several adult books on anthropology, as well as numerous books of poetry and stories for children.

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The advisement program at Bank Street began to take shape as enrollment increased and many schools, both private and public, became the sites for student teaching. In the forties, student teachers no longer remained in one school throughout the year, but often experienced eight-week placements in two or three different schools, usually including one public school. Such a situation opened up for the student teachers (most of them young, fairly recent college graduates) the many perplexing questions to be expected: how to adjust in a classroom that doesn't seem to be using the methods and child-development principles taught in the classes at Bank Street? how to react and feel competent when children begin to call you names? how to develop a feeling of being an authority when the classroom teacher puts you in a very subordinate position?

Needless to say, a great effort was made by the advisors at Bank Street to locate schools and classrooms for student teaching that offered many positive opportunities for student growth but, unavoidably, some turned out to be less appropriate than others.

In the forties, students were assigned to advisors at Bank Street; they began to meet in weekly conference groups as well (no more than 12 students, often fewer). All of the advisors had had teaching experience with children, but none had been trained as counselors to help young people achieve the personal maturity relevant to professional competence. During this period, one advisor went over to the nearby New School for Social Research to take a course in counseling with the well-known Peter Blos, mainly looking for help in advising one struggling student.

The need had become clear. In 1950, a training program for the advisors was initiated by Dr. Barbara Biber, psychologist, director of Research, and chairman of the advisory group. For two years, advisors met twice a month with Dr. Viola Bernard,¹ a clinical psychiatrist with a special interest in education. The purpose was never to teach the advisors how to uncover a student's unconscious at deep levels; rather, it was how to help the student expand her self-awareness and make full use of the personality strengths necessary for the teaching role. The relationship between advisor and student was seen as one of the means for achieving professional competence, not for psychological healing.

The plan of these seminars was that each of the seven advisors would have an opportunity to present a "case study" of one or more students who seemed to need help in using their strengths to the best advantage. A good deal of material about the student was available to the advisor. The Bank Street admissions material included college records and letters of recommendation, write-ups to two interviews, a written autobiography, and answers to a "Cartoon Situations Test," devised by the Research Division to elicit ideas and feelings about child,

teacher, and parent behavior. In addition, advisors visited the student at her school once a month, conferred with the classroom teacher, had an individual conference with the student at least once every two weeks, and became further acquainted with the student in the weekly conference group. Most of the advisors also taught courses in the training program at Bank Street and, in this way, had access to other important information about student performance. For the purposes of the study with Dr. Bernard, advisors were asked to keep complete notes on all these contacts involving the student. At that time, no question was raised, as it might be today, about all of this note taking, which was definitely not to be shared with the student.

When the study with Dr. Bernard came to an end, the advisors felt it had been so helpful that they wanted to continue to have access to advice and help from experts. (It should be mentioned that Dr. Bernard was always available, as a Bank Street consultant, to see individual students who advisors felt would profit from a diagnostic interview.) Various specialists from psychiatric and social work professions met with the advisors during the late fifties and early sixties during the regular advisor meeting time. These included David Schechter, Sally Provence, and Dr. Louis Gilbert. Gradually, it became apparent that one of their own advisor group, Elizabeth Gilkeson, had the skills, experience, and training they were looking for to help them in their insights. From the early sixties on, Mrs. Gilkeson functioned as chairman to work with the advisors on student problems. She continues today to advise the advisors.

One other consultant from the outside, Dr. Mortimer Schiffer, met with the advisors in the sixties and early seventies, particularly to discuss the conference group. What was happening in these groups? What could be happening? What obstacles were in the way?

Perhaps it should be stated that during all these years the conference group was offering to many students one of their most important Bank Street experiences. Such close, meaningful bonds were formed that students often held on to them, and sometimes even arranged for conference groups to meet together at a member's home years later. The advisor, also, remained a "mentor" sought out by many students in future years. But not only the bonds were important. The conference group process taught the students a good deal about learning, about resourcefulness and autonomy, and about techniques and aims pertinent to their own teaching. ♦

Notes

1. Viola W. Bernard, M.D., was at this time Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Director, Division of Community Psychiatry, Columbia University.