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Jill Stacy
Downtown Denver Expeditionary Schools

Nayantara Mhatre
Bank Street College of Education

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BECOMING A TEACHER LEADER WITHIN YOUR CLASSROOM: A DIALOGUE

nayantara mhatre and jill stacy

I don't know what to do about Heather and Diane. Based on their written answers to literature assignments and their lack of participation in class discussions, it seems that they're not really understanding the plot of the novel we're reading as a class. I know my students are all on different reading levels, but they need help. I want them to be and feel successful, but where do I start?

(E-mail from Nayantara to Jill, December 2007)

Nayantara

I first approached Jill halfway through my second year of teaching sixth grade at a progressive independent school in New York City because I was at a loss about what to do with two of my students who had been in her class the year before. It was assumed by most, including me, that because I had made it through my first year, I “knew what I was doing.” However, I was facing new challenges that neither my first year’s experience nor my graduate school work had prepared me for.

The literature program I had inherited from previous sixth-grade teachers was based on at-home reading assignments, usually two or three chapters per week, and written responses to questions. It’s almost embarrassing to share now, but beyond the initial introduction to the novels that all the students were assigned, we rarely read together in class, and my students were not reaping the benefits of sharing ideas with their peers. The assumption was that everyone in the class could independently read literature critically.

I had taken a literacy class designed for teachers of kindergarten through third grade during my first semester of graduate school. It was the first time I had been introduced to any formal pedagogical methods; because I had never taught in a classroom, it all felt rather out of context and irrelevant. Additionally, because I was enrolled in a museum education program, I was certain I’d be developing curriculum in a museum one day, not teaching young children how to read.

However, my path had taken me out of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, where I had been designing and implementing curriculum in an after-school program for teenagers, and into the classroom. And while I am not teaching young children how to turn letters and sounds into words and sentences, in my second

year I realized that I was still teaching slightly older children how to read. The problem was that I didn't know how.

Jill

"I never learned how to really teach reading." Nayantara's words sat with me for a number of days. I recalled how lonely many periods of my years as a beginning teacher had been. I had started out down the same path five years ago as a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, asking many of the same questions Nayantara had had for me the day she approached me. I was even pursuing another degree in literacy in order to refine my classroom practice. My survival during these beginning years depended on the support of two mentors along the way, two individuals who took the time to reach out to me so I might swim rather than sink. I decided to ask Nayantara if she would consider working together with me and engage in a mentoring relationship. She readily accepted my invitation and our journey began.

My interactions with Nayantara prior to mentoring her consisted primarily of conversations during division and department meetings. I had not known who she was as an educator within the classroom before we began this relationship.

Our first meeting gave me insight into Nayantara's current literacy practices and instructional strategies. As we talked, she was able to articulate the areas of literacy she wanted to focus on and she asked me to help her change the way she taught books to the whole class.

In our division at our school, students read novels that are meant to add to their knowledge and enhance their understanding of the concepts rooted in our social studies curriculum. Nayantara was about to begin a new book, but was frustrated with the "read-answer questions-whole class discussions" format she had been using. She recognized that her struggling readers had difficulty reading the books independently at home. The students' answers were "dry," and not everyone participated in the discussions. She knew there was something else she could have been doing, but was unsure of how to break away from her current practice.

Thus began the first cycle of our relationship. We set aside one forty-five minute period a week (ordinarily a preparation period) to meet, debrief, and plan our next steps. Reflecting on our experiences was an integral part of the process; we often used concerns or questions that surfaced in our individual journals to guide our discussions. There were times, of course, that something unexpected arose and we were unable to meet, but when this happened, we kept in contact via e-mail.

Throughout this first cycle, Nayantara and I focused our work on the rea-

son she had approached me: thinking about and learning how to change reading instruction so she could meet the needs of her students. We looked at the overall concept of differentiated instruction. Using the ideas we discussed, Nayantara put a literature circles structure in place in her room.

I played several roles during this process. During our meetings, I shared with Nayantara the practices I had enacted in my room using literature circles and I asked questions about her goals for her students in using this format. When I was in her classroom, I worked primarily with the small groups she had created and occasionally one-on-one with a student. Our work was content-specific; the beginning of our relationship was, as Nayantara described it, noninvasive.

Nayantara

At first, I was cautious about working so closely with Jill. My classroom was my space, and I wasn't sure I was ready to make myself vulnerable to someone else's ideas. However, I eventually felt safe working with Jill for a couple of reasons. To be frank, the most important reason was that she was my colleague and not my supervisor. That Jill was going back to her own classroom of students made me feel that she wouldn't be judging me. It wasn't threatening to have her in my classroom. She was neither evaluating me nor giving directives; rather, she was trying to help me have more success with my students.

When we began, we focused on specific lessons and assignments. This was a productive way for us to start. We examined the types of questions I was asking, both in class and for homework. I never felt that Jill was critiquing me as a person—which can be difficult to separate from me as a teacher—but rather that she was evaluating the techniques that I was using.

When we moved on to Jill observing me, I could feel myself getting nervous. There she was, sitting in the back of the classroom furiously taking notes. However, despite my tendency to focus on what went wrong during our observation, or to focus on something entirely different that had materialized in the interim, Jill always started our debriefing meetings with positive feedback. We had built a sense of trust, and I could be honest about my concerns and bring up new issues. Because of this trust, I was confident and eager to take Jill's suggestions and tailor them to my teaching style and the learning styles of my students.

While working with Jill has been a generally positive, productive experience, there were some roadblocks with regard to our personal goals and philosophies, as well as to our relationships to other people at school.

Jill was really enthusiastic about working with me. I was excited about the possibilities, but nervous about what I had gotten myself into. She had so many ideas, both in terms of theory and practice, and it sometimes felt overwhelming. I was still a second year-teacher and I wasn't sure how much I could, or wanted to, change at one time. As our work picked up, I became more aware of all the things I could be doing better. (Thankfully, Jill was good about reminding me about the things I was already doing well.) I brought up so many things with Jill in our pre- and postlesson meetings, that as I look back, it seems that while we made progress, much of it was superficial. Perhaps, however, the surface changes were a good way to test the waters in working with Jill. Perhaps they were indicative of my anxiety about looking so closely at my own practice. In retrospect, I wish we could have picked one specific goal to examine in greater depth; I should have slowed down along with my students.

Jill

Trying to keep our work focused was definitely a recurring theme throughout my later journal entries.

I also noticed that I tried to focus our conversation, but felt that it was all over the place at some points while we are talking. I suppose this is part of discourse, but I don't want her to feel overwhelmed with too much information. (Journal entry, March 2008)

It was at this point that I knew we were no longer in the honeymoon phase. Nayantara and I had established a trusting, caring partnership, and were facing new obstacles. I realized that each time we met to debrief, the goals of our work changed. While I tried to keep our work centered on a specific literacy strategy, Nayantara posed important questions as she analyzed her practice, leading us in new directions. For example, after observing a lesson I had taught to my class on the strategy of asking questions when you are reading, Nayantara identified organization as an area she wanted to concentrate on. "Organization—of time, materials, logistics—I never think to use chart paper. How can I use chart paper?" she exclaimed. Honestly, at first I was concerned that not only did her comments point us in a new direction, but also that they were taking us away from our literacy-content focus. I wondered if I had done something wrong or had not observed something I should have noticed earlier. How was I going to ensure I included subject matter in our work together as we explored this new issue? As Feiman-

Nemser and Parker (1990), writing about coaching relationships, had pointed out, “Beginning teachers need help learning to organize students for purposes of teaching and learning,” but can still focus on structure, logistics, management, and organization, as it is “rooted in the specifics of content” (p. 41). I had forgotten that Nayantara was a beginning teacher. She’s smart, confident, and a reflective educator. That doesn’t mean, though, that she had mastered everything, just as I certainly didn’t have all the answers.

Nayantara

The major focus of our work together was exploring how differentiated literacy instruction would impact the range of learners in my classroom. While I understood that this could potentially be a positive experience for all my students, and particularly the two I had initially struggled to reach, I was not sure I bought into the concept of differentiation. At first it seemed rather unprogressive, and reminded me of the negativity I felt when I was in tracked groups in middle school. I was therefore nervous about changing things.

How is this different than tracking? Is this approach actually going to work? How would my students feel about it? Will I be making more work for myself? Will parents get upset that their child is not getting the same homework assignment as another child? (E-mail from Nayantara to Jill, December 2007)

Jill

I also wondered if our jumping from idea to idea—from organization, to asking questions, to materials—was because I pushed the topic of differentiation too quickly. I knew that Nayantara was still questioning this approach and wasn’t necessarily ready to move forward with differentiation in her literacy practice. I had encountered the same instructional difficulties and questions as Nayantara. I thought I had conveyed to her my empathy, my understanding of how I knew what she was going through. I realize now that, while I was on this journey, she would take the path she wished to take at the speed she needed, at her level of readiness.

Another challenge I encountered in my role was balancing how much information I shared directly with Nayantara, and how much I left her to discover through my guidance. I felt it was essential that she be given the opportunity to construct meaning from her own experiences, to make meaning of her own learn-

ing to teach. But I also didn't want her to feel frustrated and walk away without any ideas that she could pick and choose from to help shape her practice. Often, as we debriefed, I felt as if I dominated the beginning of our meeting by asking many guiding questions to prompt Nayantara's thinking, and that at the end I shared examples of how we could address some of the issues we had been discussing. I left feeling unsure and wondering if I had talked too much and asked either too many guiding questions or not enough questions that led in the correct direction. As I was new at this, I didn't have a definitive idea about what this conversation was supposed to feel and look like, but I knew that the dialogue would vary from person to person, and from conversation to conversation. With time and practice, a smooth rhythm fell into place.

Nayantara

While I was slightly concerned about what my students and their parents would think about my work with Jill, I was more concerned about the reaction of our supervisors. Our school generally encourages and supports collaboration, but I wondered if the work I was doing with Jill was supposed to be done instead with our learning specialist or our curriculum coordinator. I was meeting with them as well, but given the nature of that particular year, much of my time with them was spent confronting other, equally important, issues. Was working with Jill challenging the well-established hierarchy of roles at our school? Did it matter?

Jill

I struggled over how to define the nature of our relationship as it developed. In the beginning, my relationship with Nayantara exhibited many of the qualities of mentoring. I am a more experienced teacher and Nayantara was the novice or beginning teacher. However, as our relationship evolved, we moved beyond the narrow definition of mentoring. Traditionally, mentoring at our school was designed to support new teachers, but ended once the teachers were settled into their new surroundings and position. Our relationship, unlike this model, did not stop simply because we had explored our initial goals. Instead, as Nayantara began to identify her problems and address various literacy practices, we developed a professional partnership, one in which we learn from each other by asking questions, offering opinions, and providing suggestions.

While it was perhaps clear to others that Nayantara has learned from me, what was not as apparent was that I have learned from her. She asks me questions

about my practice that push me to think about the instructional strategies I choose to put in place in my classroom. I am then able to explain more clearly what I am doing and why. Ours is a professional partnership, two colleagues working together to gain knowledge that will further our literacy practices within our respective classrooms.

There's no end to this type of relationship, as you continuously question and refine your practice. Recently, Nayantara was telling me about how she would like to structure her work with student teachers and her new grade-level partner next year. As I left this informal meeting and stepped onto the subway, I wondered whether she would be taking on these leadership roles with such confidence if we hadn't worked together.

Nayantara

During my first two years of teaching I noticed a disconnect between what I had learned in graduate school and what I learned in the classroom. I found that even the most specific, practical suggestions from a professor ("If you can hear my voice, clap once...") might not be effective in every situation.

While working with Jill wasn't always perfect, it was ultimately successful. It wasn't successful because it made me think, "Great, I fixed that problem. Now we're done," but rather the opposite. It was and will continue to be successful because I feel supported and confident in rethinking and improving my practice. I'm more interested now in exploring new theories and techniques in my classroom, and I understand that not everything is going to work for my students or for me.

Although we've completed graduate school, it doesn't mean we can or should stop learning. While we can learn from our professors and our administrators, often the people in neighboring classrooms can help us the most. Jill shared her experience and knowledge through our partnership. I saw her evolve as a teacher leader, and was able to tap into my emerging leadership qualities and apply them to my own professional relationships.