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# Developing Collaborative Leaders: Reflections on Leadership Advisement at Bank Street College

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Lonnetta Gaines

Site-based management, shared decision making, and other approaches to school governance require leaders who work well with groups and who function effectively within groups. Collaborative leaders need to possess the personal awareness and human relations skills necessary to empower others to share leadership and to thereby work together for school effectiveness. Advisement in educational leadership, which has evolved from Bank Street College's seventy-five-year history of working for democratic schooling, is an effective way of developing these skills.

A growing body of school reform literature focuses on collaborative models of school administration (Comer, 1980; Gorton & Schneider, 1991; Sarason, 1990). These models are based on the idea that school issues can best be solved by the collective efforts of those people who are most closely involved. Relieving schools of the bureaucratic burdens inherent in top-down management approaches and placing decisions (and accountability for those decisions) into the hands of the primary actors can help to improve schools—if leaders in those schools are sufficiently prepared to address the challenges of their new collaborative role.

Leadership advisement at Bank Street College supports the development of the complex array of attitudes and skills associated with implementing shared models of supervision. The advisement process aims to cultivate leaders who, in addition to demonstrating technical expertise, can develop the capacities of others. Sergiovanni calls leadership from this point of view "human resources

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supervision" (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1983). The antecedent is Cogan's *Clinical Supervision* (Cogan, 1973).

The goal is to enable each student to emerge as a more capable leader who can work collaboratively with others. To accomplish this, the advisor models, facilitates, prods, plans, structures, listens, reports back, makes suggestions, poses questions, shares experiences, elicits options, and focuses discussions. In the context of the conference group, the advisor and students keep important issues at the forefront, while providing time for personal sharing and steering the talk in constructive directions. The advisor models the collaborative leadership skills she expects students to acquire. Throughout, students are encouraged to look at the processes in which they are engaging, to reflect upon their own reactions, and to think about the implications of these experiences for their own work as educational leaders.

In the conference group, students experience and reflect on group dynamics, and observe and reflect on their own behavior within a group, gaining firsthand knowledge of the qualities, skills, and strategies necessary for practicing shared decision making and collaborative leadership. Ideally, students use the conference group as a springboard for discussion, support, and shared problem solving. The group process is articulated and becomes the means for transferring this process to school settings.

This article describes the educational leadership advisement process in its role of preparing collaborative leaders. Because advisement evolves as an expression of the unique experiences, interests, and requirements of the individuals and the group, several examples are shared which, taken together, provide an overview. The examples address the following areas: (1) topics that emerge in our work with students; (2) processes that are central to leadership advisement; and (3) practical extensions of advisement.

## Topics that Emerge in Our Work with Students

Topics in educational leadership can perhaps be seen from three perspectives. First, students struggle with personal-professional issues that relate to the continuing process of defining self as leader, such as making the transition from teacher to leader and learning to feel more comfortable with exercising power. Second, students look at leadership in a more theoretical sense, making connections between ideas in the literature and their own experiences; for example, students may share articles and book excerpts that surface issues relating to equity and diversity and begin to look at their own settings more closely. Finally, students explore and practice skills needed by the educational leader to function well, including conducting good staff meetings, developing

program and curriculum, and setting and evaluating goals. Topics relating to these three perspectives emerge in individual advisement and in the conference group through conversations that are grounded in students' work experiences and personal reflections. Of course, these topics do not emerge with such categorical neatness.

For example, power and authority, naturally evolving issues in a leadership program, are discussed both from the theoretical and the personal-professional points of view. When these issues come up in conference group or advisement, students may be guided to explore literature which helps them to place their personal concerns within a broader theoretical framework. Some students have addressed the differences between power, authority, and influence and located themselves and the people with whom they work along a continuum of formal and informal leadership. For students who need to work through personal fears and hesitations that relate to assuming power, advisement provides a safe forum in which they can explore their own relationship to authority and watch themselves and others engage in the interplay of power and responsibility within the group. The advisor's role is to help students learn to exercise power effectively, creatively, and unashamedly. Students are helped to view themselves as capable leaders who are secure enough to take on and to share power and decision-making responsibilities within their settings.

Equity is another key topic that emerges. The issue of equity is often an uncomfortable one for those working in the private domain where the community served is less diverse, especially economically. For the advisor, it is important to keep the issue in the forefront, yet not to overwhelm or exclude the student who is involved in private education. One example of how this issue plays out comes from one student, a teacher-administrator in an independent school, who suggested to the board of trustees of her school that the schoolwide theme for the coming year might revolve around multicultural approaches to poetry. Coming on the heels of an outside report citing the need for more diversity in the school population and faculty, the suggestion was well received and enabled this Bank Street student to exercise leadership by (1) mobilizing the faculty to develop a multicultural curriculum through the grades; (2) setting the tone as a member of the faculty-administration committee to hire a more culturally diverse faculty; and (3) helping to generate more scholarships in order to diversify the student body.

The initiation of this process began in advisement and was documented in her culminating independent study. She demonstrated how the introduction of a multicultural curriculum within her setting allowed her the opportunity to develop some of the practical skills involved in collaborative leadership: initiating an idea; enlisting the support of various constituencies, including

board members, staff, and parents; and generating financial support. Through this practice-based project, she increased her effectiveness within the community of her school by working with others toward the accomplishment of shared goals relating to equity and multicultural education.

In another leadership conference group, students' discussion of multicultural education led to closer self-examination. The students began by asking: "How do we help teachers value and develop a multicultural curriculum? How do we help teachers demonstrate more open attitudes toward diverse populations?" This group made the wise observation that in order to address issues relating to multicultural, nonsexist, and values-based education, they needed to work first with themselves, recognizing that as leaders they needed to be self-aware. In the conference group, they explored aspects of their own cultures with each other. Later, they began to address their feelings about differences. When they returned to issues of staff development and curriculum, their increased awareness and sensitivity enabled them to engage in more critical discussions of their own practice.

Collaborative leaders need to be willing to look closely at their own responses to sensitive issues so that they can work more effectively with others. Some topics generate greater emotions than others and stimulate more personal concerns. In these instances, the advisor helps the students negotiate the personal territory within the professional context. In one group, for example, at the same time that one student was handling medical emergencies with both parents, another student was confronted with the sudden death of a teacher on her staff. In discussing these situations, the group explored the kinds of professional decisions the student whose staff member had died needed to make, and they shared recollections of their own personal responses to the irrevocable reality of death. More important, students were able to bring to the surface and describe their own internal responses to crisis situations and to discuss the relationship of those responses to decisions which they make as administrators. Out of these discussions, we began to discuss choices an administrator has to make when dealing with absenteeism with staff due to personal crises and emergencies of many kinds.

As students make the transition from the role of classroom teacher to school leader, they frequently struggle with issues relating to self-definition. One student came to Bank Street after twenty-five years as a public school teacher. She had been extremely active in union issues. Although she was interested in her own professional development, she was not sure whether she wanted to see herself cast into the role of a supervisor. She had a stereotyped view of the supervisor as being dull and uncreative, but a very real commitment to teachers as a result of her long years as a union representative. Moreover, she felt

somewhat tentative about leaving behind her firm base of professional teaching experience. During advisement, she began to see that her work as a union representative had provided her with a base in leadership upon which she could build. In addition, she shared a program that had been effective for her as a classroom teacher with other teachers in her school. Later, she was appointed assistant principal and was selected to implement a challenging new parent program. Advisement enabled her to focus on this transition from classroom teacher to schoolwide educational leader.

Working collaboratively with and within groups to negotiate intricate processes of educational change requires that people be self-aware and willing to change. In this regard, in individual sessions and during conference group meetings, the advisor raises questions that help students become more reflective. One student came to Bank Street after having founded one child care center and having worked as director of another center. This student needed to become more aware of the effect of her strongly held and strongly voiced views. In advisement she gained an understanding of her behavior and was able to translate her somewhat authoritarian leadership style into one that included more collaboration and more flexible approaches to problem solving.

### Processes that Are Central to Leadership Advisement

Leadership advisement is similar to the work of shared-decision-making teams in that each group develops topics for exploration and discussion out of their institution's needs. In addition to institutional needs, each student comes with his or her own set of issues, skills to be developed, and problems to be addressed. The advisor begins by working with the student to set professional goals. Evaluation of these goals takes place periodically during the advisement year. Within the group, the advisor utilizes several processes to elicit topics and to facilitate constructive group interaction.

One advisor structures her conference group meetings so that students address a variety of topics in each session. She allows initial time for students to share complaints, victories, and situations relating to the work setting. Next, students report on their ongoing work in relationship to their field-work projects. Finally, students spend a significant amount of time discussing selected educational issues as they relate to the broader social context.<sup>1</sup>

As advisor, I have tried to model techniques fruitful for the educational leader, encouraging discussion of issues that emerge within the students' workplace and providing resources—including articles, speakers, and videotapes—to highlight specific ideas. I serve as both facilitator and recorder for the group discussions and, after a time, give students a written summary of their conference

group conversations. Students use the summary to reflect on, categorize, and prioritize their own ideas, making plans for continued discussions, identifying topics, and choosing discussion leaders so they can practice and refine their skills as workshop and seminar leaders. Through this process, students see that their own thinking is valued; in addition, they gain important practice in the process of shared decision making.

Adapting this idea, one student began to record the reflections and comments of staff on charts during her staff meetings at the early childhood center where she worked as educational director. She found that when staff saw her taking their ideas so seriously, they became much more willing to participate in discussions. Another student, a director of an early childhood center, had staff work in small teams to record their curriculum themes and activities onto charts. She then typed up the staff writings and consolidated them into a collaboratively written curriculum. Both students asked staff to present reports in staff meetings whenever they attended conferences or workshops. Students found that these activities led to increased staff self-confidence and greater involvement.

Central to the work of the advisor is the use of conversations and dialogue as bridges to supporting professional growth. Posing thoughtful questions is a pivotal part of this process. The leadership advisor has the delicate task of prodding and nudging a sometimes reluctant student to take on an expanded role as leader and, during the advisement year, to demonstrate that role in some practical manner. Usually, this involves the student in enacting some change project within the work setting, sometimes while changing his or her role relationships to others as well. Asking questions increases the comfort level, stimulates thinking, allows students to discover their own answers, and enhances the possibility that students will act upon those answers. We use questions that reflect both general areas of concern in leadership development and specific topics that relate to interests and problems of particular students, such as:

- How do you respond to change?
- What is your usual response to conflict?
- Think about a situation in which you were involved that included conflict. What was your response?
- When someone gives you an order, what is your usual response?
- What are your goals this year for your staff?
- What kinds of questions can you ask in meetings that will allow the teachers and assistants to clarify and articulate their knowledge about children and learning?
- What tools can you use in your staff meetings that will help your

teachers begin to build a curriculum?

- In what ways can you model the behavior that you desire your teachers to demonstrate?
- What kinds of questions do you ask to stimulate the creativity of your teachers to move beyond educational prescriptions?
- What are the indications that you have a problem in your setting?
- What steps can you take to address this problem?
- How will you know that you have been effective?
- What role did you play in resolving this problem?
- Where do you see yourself moving as a professional?
- What has to happen to facilitate this movement?

This questioning process helps students articulate ideas and beliefs and supports creative thinking. Sergiovanni (1990) alludes to this power of the well-framed question in referring to Robert K. Greenleaf's account of 18th century American Quaker, John Woolman. Woolman convinced his society to renounce slavery through utilizing this device of raising questions. This example illustrates an important point: Leadership advisement is not value-free. Advisors use questions and other techniques to help students confront and address issues that relate to social responsibility and action. The leadership advisor has the delicate task of recognizing the needs of individuals and the immediate concerns of the group, while situating these needs and concerns in a broader social, political, and moral context.

### Some Practical Extensions of Advisement

Working with parents, teachers, and other professionals within schools provides an excellent opportunity to utilize the Bank Street advisement model. The advisement process, which combines individual meetings with small group sessions within a facilitative mode, is one that is easily transferrable to other settings. In one collaboratively led high school, the co-principals are both Bank Street graduates. They recognized the need to provide extended time for staff development and, therefore, supported staff who volunteered to attend an out-of-town conference. They used the occasion as an opportunity to present staff with an application to apply for national recognition of their school. The application involved extensive reflection and writing, and the leaders knew that collaboration was necessary for completion. The staff decided to apply and, when they returned to their school, involved other staff, parents, and students in the application process. This school won blue ribbon recognition as a national demonstration school of excellence. The leaders feel that this recognition is a



testimony to the power of shared decision making and collaborative work.<sup>2</sup>

One Bank Street student, the educational director in a private elementary school, effectively utilized the small-group format with parents (some of whom were also board members) who were concerned that the school's experience-based curriculum would not effectively prepare their children to compete when they went on to junior high. This issue had been hotly debated in both board and parent meetings, but no conclusion had been reached. It seemed that parents were ready to use their power to institute a more traditional curriculum in the school. In advisement, this student decided to schedule a series of small-group breakfast meetings with the parents to address their concerns. A majority of the parents, both mothers and fathers, attended the meetings and the result was not only an increased understanding and acceptance of the experience-based curriculum, but a general improvement in the relationship between administration and parents.

Site-based management and shared decision making, school improvement committees, cooperative management groups, and other collaborative approaches require leaders who support the development of leadership capacities in others. One principal, a graduate of Bank Street's first leadership program, illustrates this point.

Our school, in its fourteen-year history has always been a collaborative enterprise. There are no important decisions made that are not made with the consensus of the staff. Teachers have their own budgets, they develop their own curricula, make decisions about scheduling, about issues with parents, room assignments, make-up of classes, and so on. We define our school as a collaborative enterprise dedicated to individualized, humane education. Bank Street's leadership program helped to prepare me to lead the school in this way. In the leadership program, everything was collaborative, everything was shared. People supported each other and shared their expertise and materials. It was a very good model. In our [conference group], the experience of sharing and getting support from colleagues made it clear to me that this was the way that teachers really operated best. The experience of being valued as a professional helped me to value professionals myself. Having the experience helped me to realize how important collaboration is to one's own development.<sup>3</sup>

This statement points to an essential value of collaborative approaches to leadership: Collaboration fosters human development. At its core, the leadership advisement process at Bank Street College relies upon the cultivation of human potential for the purpose of improving educational institutions. As John Gardner (1990) writes: "The release of human possibilities is one of the most

basic of social objectives and leadership goals. . . . It is a matter of self-interest for every society to remove obstacles to human growth and performance" (p. 74).

### Acknowledgment

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### Notes

1. Bank Street colleague, Dr. Lorraine Monroe, provided this example of her work with leadership students in advisement.
2. Bank Street graduates, Margaret Dempsey and Margaret Lake, provided this example of their work from Catherine McAuley High School in Brooklyn, New York. The school was one of 222 schools nationwide selected to receive, in May of 1991, a Secondary School Recognition Award from the U.S. Department of Education.
3. Blossom Gelernter, principal of P.S. 234 in Manhattan and graduate of Bank Street's first leadership program in 1975, shared these reflections.

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