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A Theoretical Framework for Advisement

Dorothy Bloomfield

The conception of teacher education at Bank Street College is that of a personal-professional developmental process. The most intensive—and distinctive—part of this process at Bank Street is called advisement.

Advisement is highly valued by those who have participated in it. Advisors and advisees have attested in surveys conducted every few years that advisement has been successful as a means of teacher education.

Advisement was developed during the first few years of the teacher education program in the 1930s. While the approach has not changed since then, the practice of advisement has become solidified by means of advisors' self-study, so that advisement is now effective for a wider range of students and situations.

On the other hand, until recently little has been published on the theory behind advisement and the relationship between theory and practice since Barbara Biber, Elizabeth Gilkeson, and Charlotte Winsor (1959) wrote *Basic Approaches to Mental Health* and Claudia Lewis (1969) wrote *The Conference Group Leader—Model?*

Advisement is what Argyris and Schön (1974) called "theory-in-action." The theory is tacit or implicit—in people's heads and actions; it needs to be made explicit once again and in a form conducive to research studies and publication.

Characteristics of Advisement

As one who has attempted to write about the theory and practice of advisement, I offer a few conjectures about why it has proven so difficult to capture its totality. First, for the most part, those who have tried to study and write about advisement have been practicing advisors. For a variety of reasons, the research from Bank

Dorothy Bloomfield spent more than twenty years as an advisor at Bank Street College before her retirement in 1984. She has taught math, social studies, and Principles of Education; administered the Teacher Education Program; and was a classroom teacher for ten years. The author of Perspectives on Teaching (1977), Mrs. Bloomfield has long felt challenged to try to explain just what it is that teachers and advisors do.

Street College has focused more on children and their learning than on teacher education. What is more, one suspects that the importance of advisement is most clear to those who participate in the process—teachers and teacher educators. In addition, the role of the advisor is a demanding one, highly stimulating and, in general, an encompassing and fulfilling activity, making it difficult to devote time to write about it in depth.

Second, advisement is a developmental and dynamic process characterized by constant change; it neither stands still to be photographed nor provides us with clear data regarding cause and effect. Besides, much of the development is a matter of change in awareness, focus, or understanding on the part of an advisee and may show up in observable action or behavior only later when a situation calls for it.

Third, advisement is built on a number of intra- and interpersonal relationships: relationships within the individual between past and present, emotions and intellect, behavior and interpretation, belief and thought; and relationships among people, primarily between advisor and advisee, but also between advisee and children, colleagues, and instructors. There is great variation from person to person, and often interrelationships are not only complex but also tacit.

So, how to describe and study this fluid and interrelated and complex process of advisement? how to express the theories which are put into action so that decisions about how to proceed can be made and assessed? how to determine whether advisement results in effective teachers of children?

It seems to me that the practice of advisement itself offers a logical starting point. To illustrate the possibilities, I offer here the *method* used to study advisement action from an unpublished and incomplete study done a few years ago with Katherine O'Donnell, and some *preliminary findings* from the study; and a *profile* from that study which provides a glimpse of the developmental facet of advisement and the relationship involved between advisor and advisee.

The method and preliminary findings might lead to further exploration of the raw data or suggest similar studies by other advisor/theorists. The profile, if combined with similar new data to be collected from current advisors, might provide the opportunity to identify principles to be studied for congruences between theory and practice, or even suggest ways to test out results of various actions on advisee development.

Advisement Study: Methods and Preliminary Findings

Data for the unpublished, unfinished study mentioned above were collected in the late seventies. Six teacher education advisors were interviewed near the beginning, the middle, and the end of the academic year about their advisement activities. Their 45 advisees either were interviewed or filled out a questionnaire

about their advisement experiences at the same periods.

The advisor interviews were semi-structured. Open-ended questions were formulated in order to keep preconceptions on the part of those conducting the study from unduly influencing findings. For example, advisors were asked for "a rundown on your activities" for the previous week, leaving it up to them to utilize their own conceptions of the advisement process in organizing their responses. However, optional follow-up questions like, "Did you have a particular reason for . . . (some action described)?" or "Was that your usual way?" probed their underlying theoretical ideas if they did not automatically offer them.

In another question, advisors were asked to describe recent work with one advisee. The follow-up questions ("What did the advisee present?" "How did you start and why?" "What are your plans from here on?") probed the assumed individualization, joint endeavor, and assessment features of advisement in case advisors organized their responses in other terms. Some questions were more directly theoretical but personalized, such as, "How do you see the relationship between what you do and what happens in the placement?"

In general, advisors did follow the theoretical pathways we assumed. They described what they did and gave reasons for their decisions. They gave initial impressions of their advisees' backgrounds, approaches to learning, strengths, needs, and so on. They included tentative decisions and reassessments based on advisee responses. They even, on occasion, preempted the questions by relating their thoughts about relationships in the program and their own personal backgrounds and ways of approaching problems (the subject of the last question: "How does the advisement approach to education compare with the way you were educated?").

The initial analysis of the data was a search for themes underlying the activities of all the advisors. Such themes were found to ebb and flow across the year, with particular emphasis at one or another of the periods. The themes stressed by advisors, presented in the periods at which they were emphasized, follow.

1. **Early in the year:** This is the period when the program is being introduced and explained. Advisors most often related activities and ideas having to do with:

- a. creating a learning climate in which advisees feel comfortable, cared for, and related to one another;
- b. acquainting advisees with Bank Street College processes, expectations, and beliefs about teaching and learning;
- c. understanding advisees' personality styles and needs in order to respond on personal and professional levels to each one individually and to them as a group.

2. Middle of the year: By this time the substantive work of advisement is in full swing with most advisees. The focus is on advisees and their learning about children and how to be a teacher. Most advisees are engaged jointly with their advisors in planning, reflecting on, and assessing their classroom activity. Some are being encouraged, urged—even challenged—to engage in educational encounters. The early focus on a warm, social, trustful climate has become a tacit underpinning for personal-professional development themes, of which the dominant ones were:

a. understanding and responding to children individually and in groups in terms of both their unique personalities and developmental stages;

b. curriculum development in the classroom, the content and technology of teaching;

c. working with other adults to enhance children's learning. (This was mostly in terms of relationships between teachers and assistants or student teachers, or between teachers and school authorities. For some, especially in early childhood settings, relationships with parents were also included.)

3. End of the year: To an extent, expressed advisee concerns dictated many of the activities. The search for jobs and anxiety about being on their own without the supports they had found in advisement joined ongoing professional work with children as major concerns. Advisors became aware of a need for advisees to sum up, solidify, and assess their development as teachers and to plan future activities as independent professionals. Advisors described activities that dealt with:

a. drawing general principles from their year's experiences and making relationships between their experiences and those of children;

b. planning next steps in their professional lives;

c. assessing advisees' strengths and needs, both as a means of bolstering their confidence and of recognizing areas where plans for further development could be explored.

It is possible to infer from advisors' responses to the interview questions elements of a shared theoretical approach to advisement. Such a theoretical approach may have application, not only to advisement and teacher education, but also to the teaching/learning of children. The following tentative list of elements inferred from advisor descriptions might serve as an impetus to one or more advisors to explore further in order to state a more unified general theory:

- Learning engages many aspects of the learner's personality.
- Learning is usually a joint endeavor between the learner and others who may relate to the learner in a variety of ways.

- Learning takes place most effectively in an atmosphere in which the learner feels known, cared for, and trusting.
- The purpose of a warm, caring atmosphere (or climate) is to make it possible for the learner to engage as a whole person and feel free to participate, to experiment, to assess success and admit mistakes, to change, and to try again.
- Good (“open,” democratic) relationships with others are important to a good learning climate. For such relationships, the learner’s background, ideas, desires, and ways of learning need to be respected, and the agendas of others should be clearly conveyed, not hidden.
- Agendas need to be agreed upon and assessed jointly. (In advisement, this starts with the assumption that both advisor and advisee have as a project the development of the advisee into a teacher of children. What being a teacher means, what roles each plays, and what pieces should be worked on in what sequence can be colored by differing styles, preconceptions, and hang-ups, so that self-awareness becomes an ingredient of the process.)
- Learning, especially the learning that enables one to perform a role like teaching, is best promoted by situating students in contexts where they have to practice what they know about teaching and learning.
- Teaching is a complex activity requiring the application of a rational, thoughtful approach. In advisement, teachers learn by reflecting upon their practical experiences. They describe, explain, analyze, assess, and generalize in their conferences with their advisors. They become aware of themselves as teaching planners and assessors as well as classroom practitioners.
- Teaching is also characterized by immediacy. Teachers tell us that when they are in classrooms with children, they have to act spontaneously much of the time. There is insufficient time to think through all the factors before responding to a child or an unexpected event. Yet the practice-reflection process seems to promote effective spontaneous responses as well as thoughtful planning and useful assessment. What appears to happen is that advisors build a repertoire of understandings and appropriate responses that can be called upon instantaneously when a situation approximates one they have thought through.
- Learning to teach is a continual, ongoing process, not a one-time occurrence. The habit of reflection enables teachers to expand and refine their repertoires and to solidify their grasp of all that teaching encompasses.
- There are parallels between advisement, classroom teaching of children, and other activities that aim at enabling people to learn, like staff development and other adult education. For example, a teacher—whether advisor, classroom teacher, supervisor, or instructor—needs to understand his/her learners and their situations. Each needs a repertoire of possible responses to what their learners present. Such responses may range from getting out of the way or

introducing a piece of information to asking a leading question or just listening, offering sympathy, a response, a helpful person to consult, or a suggestion. And each needs the rational skills and habit of reflection in order to plan a curriculum for an individual or group, assess what happens, and continue self-development.

A Profile

A case study of advisement between one advisee and one advisor illustrates the varying supports and shared tasks as advisement moves from one arena to another, from one level of skill to others, and from one dimension of the personal-professional spectrum to another.

In the interviews that provide the material for this mini case study, advisors described and explained their advisement activities at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the year. One advisor mentioned a particular advisee, B, at each period. The themes that we found underlying advisors' activity are illustrated in these descriptions of work with B. The descriptions also make it possible to get a sense of the advisee's development across the year.

1. **Early in the fall:** establishing a learning climate in which trust and self-awareness can develop, explaining the program, getting to know advisees.

Describing the advisees in her group, the advisor said that B had a strong interest and undergraduate background in child development, the area in which the advisor also specialized. B was familiar with the advisor's published work and indicated that she was especially pleased to be in the advisor's group. B was younger and had less classroom experience than most of the other advisees in the group, but she seemed to be holding her own in discussions and to be liked and respected by the others. B signed up for an advanced child development course on Piaget because of her background. Her placement was with 8-year-olds whose teacher was strong in curriculum development, an area in which B needed work. Adults in the school where she was student teaching reported that B was mature and sensitive and doing well with the children. The advisor found B amiable and said B was a joy to work with.

However, one day early in the semester a supervisor in the school reported that B was having difficulty concentrating on classroom activities because she was "distracted" over an incident which had happened on the way to school. In a conference later in the day, B told the advisor about it:

For some reason, I went up Riverside Drive. I was suddenly stopped by a man who said, "Don't go there. There's a dead man lying on the ground."

The dead man was evidently a suicide. B spoke with feeling about this person who must have been very lonely. In response to the advisor's encouragement, she went on to discuss other traumatic incidents involving untimely death

she had experienced in her short life. The advisor listened sympathetically and asked why B had decided that loneliness was the cause of the unknown man's distress. The advisor added, about the conference:

Obviously we had a lot to work out. Now, that was the kind of conference which was hers and very unique to her particular need. I couldn't have planned for it, and she didn't plan for it. But it allowed us to take advantage of the situation for her to really delve into what was distressing to her. She felt it was a very important conference for her.

In a later conference, B said she realized that she had a tendency to over-identify with people in difficulty. The advisor had concluded that while B was warm and sensitive, she was relatively mature emotionally and not, as the advisor had at first feared, carrying such heavy emotional burdens that self-awareness would be difficult to attain.

2. Middle of the year: understanding children and child development, curriculum support, fostering positive relationships in placement. (This episode also illustrates the supportive nature of the other advisees in the conference group.)

B mentioned in the conference group meeting that she was trying to help the children in her placement put on a play. Her cooperating teacher had suggested the activity. It was not working out well. B seemed to be feeling inadequate.

As the other advisees questioned B and described experiences of their own that were similar, the advisor put together a more complete story. The children had been doing a lot of teasing. The teacher chose a story she thought would help the children realize why they were picking on their classmates and lead them to change their behavior. But, said B, the children seemed wary and couldn't seem to settle down with her.

The advisor mentioned, and the group talked about, the use of dramatic play as therapy and dramatics as an educational technique. The group seemed to be grasping where teachers' "educational boundaries" were in respect to the use of dramatics.

The advisor visited B's classroom the next morning. An approach was worked out at a three-way conference with the teacher and B so that the children could invest their dramatic roles with their own emotions if they wanted, but could also distance themselves from their characters if they chose. The three of them talked about practical ways of helping children of this age move from a story narrative to a dramatic form. They agreed that B would help the children make stick puppets to concretize the characters in the story. The children could then use their puppets to work out relationships and try out segments of the

drama before acting it out themselves.

Later that day, in a brief conference, the advisor gave B more specifics about materials and where to get them. She also suggested that B keep notes on the children's responses to the activity for further reflection at their next regular conference.

3. **End of the year:** summing up, drawing general principles, planning next steps, support for job search. (This interview material also illustrates directing an advisee who is ready toward an educational leadership role of sharing with others in the field and working through moral and social issues related to education.)

The advisor mentioned in her third interview "the thorough job of combining theory and practice" B did for her course on Piaget. B had used the development of the play to illustrate. In the advisor's words:

She had done a fine job of helping children turn a story into a play via concrete experiences. The children were able to work through ideas and characters from the global abstraction of a story, and to turn the ideas back into another abstract totality, a play, for dramatization. B used the experience as the basis for a paper describing how Piagetian perceptions of child development were illustrated in each step the children took.

The advisor suggested that B share her paper with another advisee in the group who had developed "a piece of curriculum" with children who were slightly older but still "for the most part at [Piaget's] concrete operational stage of development." The advisor also asked for copies of the paper to put in the library to serve as resource material for an advanced course in child development she conducted.

An extra phone call from B brought up new issues:

She called me on Saturday. She had had an interview in [a suburban school system nearby] and didn't think she could work there.

B was bothered by attitudes expressed by administrators when they described their system as "an oasis, the best system in the country," where their (all-white, blond) kids were especially bright and grades were the main objective. "I've learned to work at Bank Street in a way which is almost ideal," said B. "I'm beginning to see that the world isn't like that." The advisor continued talking about their telephone conversation:

We got into a whole discussion of where do you compromise and where don't you? What does it mean to be a person who is ahead of the field in this regard?

So I pulled her into our community. She's now a teacher—with a special point of view. I pointed out that those of us who hold it have to

face the fact that part of our role is leadership. I said, "You're wonderful with children. Now you've got to look at how you work with adults. What can you do with adults?" ♦

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