# The First Years Out

**Editors**
judith leipzig
jonathan g. silin

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elizabeth huffman
scott moran
rachel mazor
marika paez
nancy gropper

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Bank Street College of Education, founded in 1916, is a recognized leader in early childhood, childhood, and adolescent development and education; a pioneer in improving the quality of classroom education; and a national advocate for children and families.

The mission of Bank Street College is to improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the educational process all available knowledge about learning and growth, and by connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world. In so doing, we seek to strengthen not only individuals, but the community as well, including family, school, and the larger society in which adults and children, in all their diversity, interact and learn. We see in education the opportunity to build a better society.

## THE FIRST YEARS OUT

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## INTRODUCTION

judith leipzig

*JUDITH LEIPZIG is on the faculty of the Bank Street College of Education Graduate School, where she teaches courses and mentors student teachers in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education Programs. In addition, she has developed and teaches the "New Teachers Online Forum," an online course for Bank Street graduates in their first three years of teaching.*

Once a year in the General Education Student Teaching Program at Bank Street College, we host an event for our current students at which former advisees return to talk about their first-year teaching experiences. As I read the essays in this issue, I remembered listening to one of our panelists, a fine K/1 teacher who had been working for five years in a New York City public school. She told our students,

> *Every day of my first year of teaching, I cried in the ladies room during lunch. It was a very hard year for me. I had a particularly difficult class. But I can tell you now that teaching is what I do, and I have no question that being a teacher is what I was meant to be. So if you're having a really hard time in your first year of teaching, don't give up on yourself.*

The essays here reflect the voices of those in the midst of becoming the teachers they hope to be. Elizabeth Huffman uses the journals she kept during her first year to give the reader a vivid sense of that time, and she reflects on what later helped her to stay in teaching long enough to become competent and happy in the classroom. Marika Paez tells the story of how her encounter with one troubled child and her second-grade class allowed her to see what it means to work authentically, aligning her teacher self and her personal self in the classroom. Scott Moran describes the shift from his first year to his second year of teaching as he recounts his frustrations and his epiphanies. He writes that "the ethic of critical reflection, honed principally through the advisement group process and supported by thoughtful coursework," helped him see his way past his notions of how to teach children in general, to the actual children with whom he worked that second year.

Rachel Mazor shares her journey from pre-school social studies teacher to high school English teacher, with several stops in between, and explains, "…there was some-

thing about each of these teaching experiences that…told me I was on the right track…." Finally, Nancy Gropper, a master teacher educator on the Graduate School faculty at Bank Street, sees herself and her own ongoing "becoming" in the new teachers with whom she works, as she identifies what is needed to help all teachers to flourish.

With the support of my colleagues at Bank Street, I am always thinking about teaching—how to teach, what to teach, what teaching is, who learners are, what the relationship between the teachers and learners should be. I think about it from the viewpoint of my advisees, and the new teachers with whom I work. I think about it from the viewpoint of someone who has been teaching babies and children, teachers and parents, in schools and therapeutic programs and colleges and prisons for twenty-seven years. And when I'm lucky—on the days when I'm really awake—I have a lot more in common with the new teachers in this volume than one might imagine. On those fortunate days, I remember three vital aspects of teaching that are explored in these articles.

First, teaching is about being present to what or who is before us. This requires the development of curiosity, an interest in the students' experience. Scott Moran comes to understand that "…it may be that when teaching feels noticeably easier, you have stopped trying to delve deeper and stopped paying attention to the differences in each child and group of children."

Most of us haul around our ideas—some thought out, others inherited—about what a teacher should be doing and feeling and making happen, and what students should be doing and feeling and producing. On top of our own preconceptions, we are often burdened with the weight of governmental or school mandates. All of this baggage tends to interfere with our ability to see what is actually happening with our students and what they need. Of course, theory and technique, carefully developed curricula, and an articulated approach to our work is essential in a thoughtful pedagogy. But the most potent teaching happens when teachers are able to set aside their ideas about their students, and respond to the *particular* children in their classrooms.

Second, teaching is about bringing our whole selves—our hearts, minds, and ethics—to the classroom. Teaching happens both through who we are and what we do. Marika Paez describes what she calls "a significant moment" in her teaching when:

> *I was able to stop thinking and planning how I was going to teach this or that lesson, or "use" this or that moment, and instead, to be emotionally authentic with, to truly listen to, and to put my full trust in my students.*

This kind of compassionate and respectful teaching can transform a classroom. Teachers who draw on their own life experiences to make sense and to make connections invite children to do the same. When we remember to ground our classroom interactions in genuine relationships—not in arrangements created by who has more power and who has less—then deep learning and profound growth can happen.

Third, teaching rests on the development of an interdependence between students and teachers, among colleagues, between parents and professionals, and among the students, themselves. Nancy Gropper writes,

> *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 awesome and that are far better addressed in collaboration than in isolation.*

In the midst of that interdependence is the recognition that we are all in this together—we are all teaching and learning from each other. In Elizabeth Huffman's article, the reader is struck by how toxic a school culture can be. She tells us, "During my first year, I felt I was being punished for simply not knowing what to do. No new teacher should feel so alone with her mistakes." In that setting, teachers hid what they did not know, and, of course, could not work together to learn what they needed to learn. The shaming isolation that such an atmosphere encourages makes it impossible to develop a clear picture of oneself as a teacher. Later, a truer mirror was held up for Huffman, when the feedback of a wise mentor showed her how much she already knew about teaching, and how she could continue to develop her skills. And this connectedness develops between children and teachers, as well. When Marika Paez describes her work with her children, she shows us how she was "forced to trust the children and to rely on them as partners, trying to figure out how to resolve the situation." What began as a "last resort" became an understanding that is now central to her teaching.

One more aspect of teaching: generosity. I am often touched by the willingness of teachers to share whatever they have learned from their own journeys, to tell their stories as a way of keeping us all afloat. Elizabeth Huffman's mentor told her that "teaching is an act of hope." In these articles we find courage, resourcefulness, insight, and inspiration. We are reminded, in the words of that visiting K/1 teacher, not to give up on ourselves.

**WHEN SEPTEMBER COMES AGAIN**

elizabeth huffman

*ELIZABETH (BECKY) HUFFMAN teaches second grade at Manhattan School for Children, a public school in New York City. She grew up and attended public schools in Brooklyn, and has been teaching in New York for six years. Becky received her undergraduate degree from Connecticut College, and recently completed the Dual Degree in Early Childhood/ Special Education at Bank Street.*

When I think of my first year teaching, my stomach turns over. I need to breathe very carefully to suppress the feeling that I have to throw up. I don't know when this is going to go away.

My first year teaching was five years ago. I took a position, straight out of college, in second grade at a public school in a poor, isolated neighborhood in Brooklyn. On the surface, it was the perfect job. I grew up less than a mile from where I was teaching, and could live at home while I got on my feet. The school had been troubled and mismanaged in the past, but it was starting afresh with a new principal and new teachers. All of us were excited about beginning something important. I had always wanted to be a teacher, and I was bursting with the desire to get started.

By January, I was counting the days until I could leave. By the end of the year every administrator had been replaced, two teachers had left under terrible circumstances, and half of the staff was applying for new positions. On June 28th, on the last day of school, the staff sat in the stifling cafeteria for a final meeting. The principal announced that despite the plummeting test scores and violence, the school would not come under review by the New York State Board of Regents' Schools Under Registration Review (SURR). No one applauded.

In New York City, a third of new teachers leave the classroom after three years. I refused to be a statistic during my first year teaching. While I have now made it past that all important, three-year line, in my heart I believe I qualify as one of the quitters. I left my first school after one year to teach in a better one. Two years later, I left the classroom and went back to Bank Street Graduate School full-time. After only three years of teaching, I was burned out and needed a break. I wasn't sure if I would return to the profession I had dreamed about since I was eleven years old. In part I went back to being a student to give myself one last chance to learn how to teach. As a Bank Street student I taught in order to fulfill the fieldwork requirements of my program, and tutored others in order to pay the bills. I consider it a minor miracle that I went back

into the classroom full-time last year, and that I now love my job and my school. Teaching in New York is not an easy road. After traveling on it, I don't wonder why so many teachers leave. I wonder, why do so many stay?

In preparing to write this essay I pulled out my old planners and notebooks from my first year. I had not looked at them since the last day of school four years ago. That summer I had ruthlessly tried to rid myself of all reminders of my first year. I even threw away the beautiful notes that my students made for me. I made myself "get over it," and took a job at a well-run and highly regarded school on the Upper East Side. But sometimes, a moment from that first year, unbidden, would take over my mind, and I would have to focus, and breathe very carefully.

I don't think of that year as my first year teaching; I think of it as the year I was a bad teacher. I haven't forgiven myself for it. I don't know when I will, or if I should. I have met several other teachers who share this secret. We laugh callously at ourselves and at our mistakes, but we don't let them go. Perhaps we're afraid we'll repeat them, or worse, forget our own fallibility. I need to believe that I didn't completely ruin the lives of those in my charge, but I will never forget just how hard I needed to work.

Now as I read over my own words from my first year teaching, I begin to cry. I have forgotten nothing from that year, nothing except my own eloquence in describing what was happening to me. (I had forgotten that a captain keeps a log even in a sinking ship.) Although it is not a pleasant afternoon, I realize now that re-reading my own words has helped me understand why I became, and why I am still, a teacher.

**September 2, 1998***

First day in Room 229. I'm trying to envision my new room, but the orange walls and rectangular shape stifle me into desk up front, chairs in rows. It's hard to see it any other way. Especially since some of the other classrooms are set up that way.

I met some of the other new teachers. All of us are so under-prepared!

**September 3**

My classroom is starting to look like a real one. Actually, it's kind of cute, with a little block area, a snuggle book area, tape cording off what will be a rug, the library kind of looking like a real library. The shelves have the appearance of being organized. There is paper on some of the walls and boards. My desk is there. It's a skeleton, the details have yet to be filled in. Oh I have so much work!

*[*Note: All names and identifying characteristics of the school, the teachers, and the students have been changed.]*

Yet I am so happy. It's fulfilling to be doing this work—it is only when I get home that exhaustion and self-doubt seep in and take over. It doesn't seem possible that school will begin next week. Hardly any of the classrooms are set up and ready. It's been long days for us.

**September 7**

I'm not nervous, which is weird. Maybe I'm in denial. Maybe I actually think I'm prepared! Ha! I can't wait to meet these kids. I want to have faces and names in my head. Feels lonely in my beautiful classroom without them. I hope this comes off—it seems like we are pushing the limits in terms of readiness.

**September 8, The Night Before…**

Suddenly I don't feel ready at all! Its 10:20 p.m., and I've been doing all sorts of random little chores, buying flowers and snacks, and making bathroom-out cards and welcome signs for the door. Wow!

I was at school for thirteen hours, moving books, doing errands, meeting parents and a couple of kids. Shy parents seem enthusiastic and friendly. I'm so tired, and so wired at the same time. Thank God they have gym tomorrow, at least they will exercise themselves out! I only received their names, my class list, at 3:00 p.m.. Who are these strangers entering a year—maybe more—with me? I can't wait to meet them!

**September 8, First Day of School**

My classroom is organized chaos.

**September 10**

Phillip, a new first-grade teacher who was having trouble managing his class, was fired on Friday. The children will have a substitute until they find another teacher for them. All of us new teachers are terrified of the same thing happening to us.

The new teachers started going to a behavior management class. The professor is surprised by the severity of some of the behaviors that we describe to her: fighting, kicking, crying, screaming, crawling on the floor, yelling.

**September 25, It's Only the 10th Day of School—How Can That be?**

Preparing for tomorrow. Hopefully my preps are still somewhat intact. They have been changed every day since the first day of school. I am supposed to have a meeting fifth period. I feel bad I lost my temper today—and it didn't work. I just hope I can keep Jessica, Samuel, and Ralph in control tomorrow. During Ralph's first day in my class

after being switched in, he didn't sit down once, and walked around the room putting "kick me" signs on the other kids' backs. It was all I could do to keep the other children from pummeling him.

**September 27, New Teacher's Seminar, Saturday Morning.**
(All of the new teachers in my district were required to take a six-week class which met Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. We heard lectures about how to read aloud, how to organize portfolios, in what order we should schedule our days. Many lecturers contradicted each other, but in general we were all so confused and overwhelmed it didn't matter. Several sessions were devoted to reading and discussing the new reading and writing standards that New York State had just published. These discussions included instructions on how the standards should be labeled on your monthly bulletin boards.)

This class always makes me feel inadequate. I've been searching for the word—sad, depressed, anxious, pressured. Standards! How can I think about Literacy Standards when I'm really at the very beginning, trying to catch up!

I woke up at the usual time this morning in the usual state—tense. I had to convince my body to keep sleeping. Finally I had to get up and start moving around. I'll drive myself insane by thinking too much. All the mistakes, all the things I don't know. All that I am afraid to ask about these kids.

**October 14**
Jessica, Maria, and Michaela, suspended for fighting.

**October 20**
(After the fight I was called into a meeting with the principal and Michaela's mother. The mother refused to speak to me, or even to make eye contact. She insisted that her daughter be removed from my class, immediately. The principal sat there, nodding. I didn't argue. After several frustrating power struggles with this child, I was ready to give her up. When the mother left, the principal turned to me and said, "What is going on in your class?" I burst into tears.)

Michaela is leaving my class. Had awful meeting with Mom this morning.

I seem to be losing time in my day—it's getting shorter and shorter.

**October 22**
Had a really good day, except that Dean Gillian was assigned to "help" me. His words of advice: "Even out the window shades. It's distracting the kids to have them uneven like that."

**November 26**

Normalcy. Things are going well. Well, normal here doesn't pass anywhere else. Called Antonia's mother to make an appointment for parent conference. She was high. I could barely understand her, and she kept yelling at Antonia. Horrifying conversation. Isn't it funny the things I have become used to—the violence, the bullets, the unstable lives, and livelihoods? Why don't these things keep me up at night? I love my children so much.

**December 24**

The new fifth grade teacher was suspended this week. She won't be back. She slammed a door on a student's arm, breaking it. She claimed it was an accident, but everyone who has heard her complaining about her class suspects that it wasn't, quite.

James told me, "My mom is upstate. She's sick and went there to get better." Translation: she's in jail. I write these "shocker" statements not to impress, but to fulfill a need to put into concrete terms the reality that my children deal with. I go home to a beautiful, comfortable house, while my children return to cramped, sometimes loveless homes.

Now it's Christmas Eve, and I'm slowly bringing my own family and life and mind back into the front of my heart and brain, and let recede the seventeen children who live inside and around me nearly every day.

**January 7, At a Writing Workshop**

(This day's seminar was conducted by a teacher from Long Island. She talked about how she likes to decorate her classroom in primary colors and keep a vase of fresh flowers on the table. Every week it is a different child's turn to bring them in. She showed slides. In them, well-dressed white children recline on large plush couches with red, yellow, and blue cushions. I wanted to scream. The only nice chair I had in my classroom had recently been defaced by an angry child, who wrote, "I hate Charlene G," in indelible green marker. What was I doing, I thought, a white teacher in this school full of angry black children?)

I feel like our voices aren't heard. Like our children's voices are silenced and shuttered. My black and brown, impoverished children's voices and needs are silently screaming for their own seminar.

**January 8**

There are so many thoughts in my head at once all the time. I have to write an essay about my life for my graduate school application. But I feel like my life is in the middle

of this incredible journey and I'm hurtling through space and time on this wild ride, and it won't be over 'til June. All I do each day is drive one mile. Incredible.

**January 12**

I'm so sick of these *&$% ing kids. My classroom structure was not in place well enough for them to pick up where they left off after vacation, so now they are back to September these past few days. I'm drained even before I come into school.

I have to hold on so that I can make it through the next five months. Five months. But God what am I thinking?!

The guidance counselor told me today that there is nothing he can do for Jessica—who washed the floor with her clothes today—crawling around under desks. There's nothing to be done! Nothing! I can't accept this. I can't accept the rude way and demeaning manner with which we are treated!

But I am a strong person. And I have wanted to do this since I was a little girl. I will not give up. I know I should be singing more and yelling less. I have a chart now of how we are following the rules, and I put a sticker on it every period. I have to go over it constantly. But when I don't give someone a sticker for one period, they cry and scream and are a mess for the rest of the day. I have to focus on the positive. I have to keep this in my mind all the time. I distance myself from them physically, sometimes, because I can't take the lack of control and the chaos. I yell because I'm angry and frustrated. They know me… Maria says, "We're making Ms. H. crazy."

**January 19**

My vice-principal said to me today, "We just have to make it to June." I don't want to "just make it." I want to teach! But what am I teaching these kids? What do they really need?

**January 23**

Is it the rain making me feel like crying? Or is it the leaving feeling? I have decided to look for a job in another school. I had to make a choice between my career and my children. I will have other children. There will be others that I will love and believe in. But am I just "making it 'til June"? That is not how I want to define the next five months of my life.

**January 31**

So what is it like to teach in a failing school? A really, really, bad school? It is nothing like they say in the papers. It has not much to do with lack of supplies. I have a beauti-

ful classroom. It has to do with walking down a dark hallway every morning, holding a heavy bag in one hand and keys in the other, and not wanting to enter your classroom.

Every morning, I try to see the light streaming in through my windows. I hear the shouts of the men working below them, making our old building safer and more beautiful. Every morning, I take a breath and try to see my classroom as a place where beautiful things are happening. And I fail. Then I turn the lights on and put the date and the "Do Now" on the board, and find my game face to put on for the children waiting downstairs.

Working in a failing school makes you feel like a failure yourself. No matter that you love your children. No matter that they love you back. It's the feeling that you've tried everything and it is still not working. They are not where they should be. You have been playing catch-up since September, and you are running out of time. The goals seem farther and farther away from your grasp. It is counting the days till June. It is celebrating that another month has finally gone by. It is praying that things cannot get worse. It is feeling alone—alone with seventeen children. Feeling attacked and unsupported by your administration. Fearful of telling them your needs, you make do in silence. A failing school is not about failing students. It is about failing communication, failing administration, lack of philosophy, lack of vision, the reactionary decisions. There is no forward motion in a failing school, only backpedaling, band-aiding problems, lying out of both sides of the mouth so that no one will find out what is really going on.

**February 1**
Five more months. Ninety days. God, I can't wait for this year to be over.

**March 3**
What will I do after crying in front of my kids today? How can I explain to them that last fight I had to break up made me break down, that I don't know if I have the strength to teach them anymore?

**March 13**
I just counted. There are fourteen weeks left.

**April 1**
We have a new command. Principal Walters is gone. The vice-principal has been put in charge of a junior high. Mrs. Fern, the woman they brought in as a consultant to Walters last month, is the principal now—this was announced the day before spring vacation. What timing! The vice-principal remains in her power-hungry and power-

starved position. Yesterday she yelled at me from across the schoolyard for picking up and hugging Jessica in the bright gorgeous sunlight. She had been suspended for a week. What can I do for this child except hug her?

**May 16**

Learned today that Principal Fern wants to give me a "U" rating and get rid of me. Funny since I've had no interaction with her, except that one negative experience of her yelling at me and pointing her finger in my face in front of my kids. It is the new vice-principal who is making my life difficult. (She has replaced the old one, the only person who had been in the school for more than a year, late last Friday night. No one knows what happened.)

**June 1**

The UFT has made a little deal with my school. I will leave quietly at the end of the year, and they will give me a passing rating. I stood next to her desk as the principal whited out the bad remarks she had written on my rating sheet. Just erased them. I don't know what part of this I feel worse about, her lack of integrity for just erasing her opinion of my teaching, or mine for accepting this?

**July 1, 1999**

Last week, last day, last hour is over. The year is closed at last. I have packed everything away—organized and packaged. I threw away all the kids' stuff—what could I do with it? I said goodbye to the room; I said goodbye to the kids—sort of? But I couldn't get out of the building without Fern making one last dig. She put her arm around me and tried to "gently" suggest that maybe I just wasn't cut out for a "tough school." I guess she thinks I'll be happier with the rich white kids. I guess I'll find out, when September comes again.

There were moments of beauty and light in my first year classroom. I hold on to those memories tighter than any others. In the spring of that first year, we raised butterflies. It wasn't any part of the curriculum, I just thought it would be fun. So, we watched the tiny black caterpillars that came in the mail squirm around in their jar. We waited like anxious mothers for them to emerge from their paper-brown cocoons. We whispered to each other so we wouldn't scare the butterflies. Then one fine day, we all walked to the park and let them go.

While we waited for the butterflies to be born from their cocoons, I handed each of my students a slip of paper and told them to write what they wished to become. We put all the papers into a paper "cocoon," and hid it on the top shelf. I told myself I

wouldn't look, but I couldn't help it, I read their wishes. Jessica, who lived with three violent older brothers, a mother suffering from mental illness, and a grandmother she called "mom" but who threatened on a weekly basis to break her fingers, neck, or arms, wrote, "I want to be a butterfly."

One day during this time, the assistant principal and the school counselor came into my room while the children were quietly coloring in paper caterpillars. They said, in shocked tones, "Why they're all working!" Things had become so bad in my classroom that people were surprised when things were going well, myself included. I had lost my confidence. I wanted to write on a slip of paper, "I want to be a teacher," and put it into a magical cocoon. Instead, I went back to school to learn to be a teacher.

Last year during my hiatus from full-time teaching, I student-taught with several experienced teachers. One in particular, a wonderful, thoughtful teacher, stands out. I observed her organization, her way of getting the kids to do what they needed to do, her humor, and her warmth. We planned together, then I taught, and we reflected on the lessons. We talked constantly about what was happening in the classroom. I found I already knew a lot about how to be a good teacher (more than I thought I did), but that I had also picked up some bad habits.

During my first year I felt I had been punished for simply not knowing what to do. No new teacher should feel so alone with her mistakes. I was not given good advice, and was, in fact, shouted at and humiliated when I made mistakes. If I had been confident that I would always receive the help and guidance that I needed, I might have learned to be honest and forthright. In my first school I became more afraid every day. I learned never to let my struggles show. I learned never to ask questions or admit mistakes. I became inflexible and negative, and shut out my creativity and humor. With this new mentor, I started to shed those habits and let the funny, interesting, and creative teacher I was emerge. I allowed myself to make mistakes, and instead of cringing or crying, I learned and got better.

One of my student-teaching placements was in Chinatown. The children had all recently arrived in America and knew very little English. I took on the project of trying to teach one little girl how written language worked. Ling, who was ten years old, had never learned to read or write in any language, and she was struggling more than the others with English. After several frustrating lessons I finally thought of using her name. We wrote "Ling." and then a list of words that rhymed with it: king, ring, sing. I made a story about each word and acted it out. The more she kept staring skeptically at me, the more stops I pulled out. I pointed at each word and asked her to read it. She really didn't want to play this game with me. I made all kinds of crazy faces and noises hoping she would feel less embarrassed if I was already acting like an idiot. Finally when

I pointed to "sing," she sang, "Lalalala!" just like I had. We both laughed. She got it: s + ing = sing like an idiot.

I am now in my sixth year of teaching. I work in a school in which teachers and children are treated with kindness and respect. I am no longer afraid to admit that I can't do it all. I seek out the opinions and wisdom of my colleagues. I am confident of my teaching skills, and I know when to trust my instincts, but I also recognize when I need to find out more information.

Why am I still a teacher? To be honest, probably because I am stubborn. I had been pushed, but I refused to be pushed out. I had never imagined doing anything else with my life. The thought of working in an office, or at home as an editor or writer, fills me with dread and loneliness. I need the company of children. I need those moments when the world stops just long enough to allow a drop of enlightenment to fall on our heads. I need to sing like an idiot. I believe, in the end, that I was saved by my mentors. I was very close to leaving, to becoming a very different person than the one I had always dreamed of being. Then I became a student of kind and honest teachers who held up mirrors and said: look, a teacher is who you already are, despite your failures.

A wise teacher once told me that teaching is an act of hope. I believe that mentoring a new teacher is also an act of hope, multiplied by all the students she will love and inspire. Every year when September comes, I have that feeling again, that feeling of oh my goodness, can I really do this? Then I take a deep breath, look into my classroom, and breath out a "yes."

**STARTING OVER AGAIN:**
**COMPARING THE FIRST AND SECOND YEARS OF TEACHING**

scott moran

*SCOTT MORAN, a native of the New York City/New Jersey area, spent his school age years in the Montclair Public School system. Later he attended the University of Rochester, where he earned a B.A. in psychology. Before enrolling at Bank Street College, Scott worked as a human resources professional. He began his first teaching job in the fall of 2001, and graduated from Bank Street in the fall of 2002. Scott currently lives in Ithaca, NY, with his wife.*

After finishing the coursework for my M.S.Ed. in December 2001, I had a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I had a similar feeling as I concluded my first year of teaching. I saw these two events as great milestones. I had the impression that together they represented a conclusion, and that I was finished with the bulk of learning to be a teacher. It was in my second year as a classroom teacher that I came to understand these milestones as the complete opposite.

In my first two years as a head teacher, I taught at a small independent school in downtown Manhattan, the Marck* School. I began my first year while still finishing my Bank Street degree. I chose to work at this particular school because the school's philosophy was well aligned to Bank Street's. Additionally, there was a great level of freedom afforded to a teacher in the Marck School, yet there was also a support system for new teachers. I considered this school a logical next step, as it would allow me to continue learning how to be a progressive educator through interaction with interesting and experienced colleagues, while also letting me experiment on my own.

I found that the Marck School was a great match for me as I made the transition from student teacher to classroom teacher. The most valuable asset I had received from my education at Bank Street was an ethic of critical reflection, honed principally through the advisement group process and supported by thoughtful coursework that examined the play between theory and practice. It was this tenet that pushed me never to be satisfied with accepting the status quo in my classroom. I developed a necessary uneasiness about coasting through the curriculum. It was not enough to reach a point where the classroom functioned smoothly. I always looked for ways it might function better. Out of this fundamental characteristic of Bank Street College came a focus on what works for students, rather than what works only for teachers and schools.

*[*Note: The name of the school and all the children' s names are fictional.]*

After finishing my first year of teaching, I felt extremely confident in my skills as a teacher. I had had a successful year, and had received praise from my supervisors. I had learned a lot in my first year, and I believed that subsequent years could only be better and easier. This assumption proved to be more than a little naïve.

In my first year of teaching, I learned or solidified a number of skills that were essential for being a teacher. I had found my "teacher voice," the voice that communicates clearly to students that you mean business and are taking control. My ability to time lessons and activities correctly had grown tremendously. After several homework assignments on which my students worked earnestly for four or five times the amount of time I expected, I also learned that there is a distinct difference between eighth graders, with whom I had had previous experience, and the eight-year-olds I was teaching. As I grew to know this group of students over the first five or six weeks of school, I was able to determine which activities would be better done individually, in partnerships, or in groups. I also found a comfortable balance of power as I attempted to maintain a democratic classroom. The children had what seemed like an instinctive drive to come together as a group around an activity. I was able to rely on this characteristic to offer them more choices and more control over the direction of the curriculum, as I could count on them to rally around a task and focus on getting it done together. If a group of students were working on a project and Jake was distracting the group, I could depend on Sophie, or any number of other children, to ask Jake to stop. Sophie's comments would usually be received with respect and recognition from the rest of the group. They knew that Sophie should be listened to, and that Jake should get back to work. Additionally, this group was skilled at helping students like Jake, even if he were prone to losing focus.

I was calm as I returned to school after summer vacation to begin setting up my classroom for my second year. Though I had been warned that my upcoming students would prove more difficult to manage than my former group, I worried little about it. I knew the curriculum and I had been successful in managing my classroom the previous year. This knowledge represented such a difference from the beginning of my first year that I figured I had little to worry about.

By the second week of my second year, my confidence had been justly shaken. It wasn't so much that my students were more difficult, it was that they were very different from my first class, both individually and in how they functioned as a group. While the strength of my first class, from the beginning of the year, was to rally around a common purpose, this group did not easily come to that point. As my belief that this group would start acting like my last group of students evaporated, it became clear that I was not prepared for what seems obvious now—every student and every group of students is

different. For instance, although I had established in my first year that certain lessons or activities were good for individual or group work, those same choices often were not the right ones for my second group of students.

The essential difference between my first and second classes was that the former came to me as a functioning group, and the latter didn't. I could always count on the pull to be part of the classroom community as a way to focus and drive the first group of students. My second group of students, however, turned out to be exactly the opposite. What drove this group was principally the work that I gave them. They did not function well as a group, and were often divisive in their interactions. It was tempting to work directly on their group interaction skills, and this was my first response. I commonly stopped what we were doing and tried to discuss social problems as they came up. This was how I had dealt with social issues in my first year, and it had worked well. For example, as four small groups in my first-year class were planning a mural of the natural environment of Manhattan for social studies, Jesse and Duane, who were working on trees, got into an argument about who in the group would get to do which tree. The other three members of the group got involved in the disagreement, and the group disintegrated into shouting and grabbing the materials from each other. I intervened and calmed the group down enough so they could talk peacefully. However, after several minutes, they were still at an impasse. I stopped the entire class, explained the problem in Jesse and Duane's group, and led a discussion of what might be done. Not only did these conversations resolve the particular situation being addressed, they also gave other students insight into similar problems they would likely run into later in the year.

However, I soon discovered that because the instances of social difficulties were so frequent with the second year's students, we often lost sight of our academic work. While my first group of students had faced difficulties once or twice a week, my second group often faced them several times a day. This class quickly lost any interest in working on group interactions, and it often seemed, even to me, that we spent more time talking about behavioral and social issues than we did on our more academic work. The conversations would ultimately spiral into circular arguments about whose fault a particular problem was, and not on a solution to the situation. It was at this point that I began to remember my training at Bank Street—to take a leap of faith when it came to experiential education. I discovered that our attempts to work on social interaction in the group were much more effective when the context was clear. With my second class, it was imperative that the reason for getting along (the need to come together for some sort of common purpose) had to be immediately apparent, not obscured by time or excessive frequency. In short, I had to pick my battles. Instead of stopping the group every time problems arose, I drew the class's attention to only the most palpable situations.

In this way, my fundamental interaction with my students was markedly different between my first two groups. In my first year, I could always count on their recognizing and being interested in a common purpose to their work. In my second year, I could not. While a desire for a sense of community drove my first group, academic work drove my second group. As a result, in my first year I could use community to produce work, while in my second year I needed to use work to produce community. For instance, when working on a mural of the natural environment of the New York City of long ago, the two groups came at the task from very different angles. My first group was primarily concerned with who wanted to work together to paint trees, rivers, etc., whereas my second group was concerned primarily with what needed to get done and how to organize to get it done. The first group relied on their affinity for group action, and the task was secondary. Their questions were first, "Who's interested in working together on this?" and second, "How are we going to get this done?" The second group asked these questions in the reverse order.

Nearly all of what I thought I had mastered in my first year needed to be called into question in my second year. It was no longer enough merely to use my "teacher voice." I now needed to pay special attention to how, why, and how often I used that voice. As I came to terms with the group dynamics of this class and let go of my ideas about what they should be, I also had to examine the power dynamic between these students and myself, part of which meant looking at the use of my "teacher voice." If I used my "teacher voice" too often, it would become ineffectual and I would clearly be exerting a level of control in the classroom that disempowered my students. If I used it inconsistently, then the students would have difficulty recognizing my reasons for using the voice.

It was uncomfortable for me to give power to this second group in the beginning of the year, as I did not know exactly what they might do with that authority. However, they needed the control I was reluctant to give in order to take ownership of their learning and to begin to see purpose in the act of coming together as a group behind a shared goal. While in the first year, I would have provided choices and flexibility in the beginning of an activity or unit, if I did this with my second group the freedom would be overwhelming to them. However, I feared that they would not learn to take responsibility for themselves if I limited their control altogether. Instead, I began to limit their control and choices at the beginning of tasks, until the framework was clear. When studying the Lenape Indians, I started out with a few categories for study from which students could choose, all having to do with basic survival needs: food, shelter, and clothes. Once they had had experience researching these topics, and (inevitably) had run across other interesting information in the process, I was able to expand the topics of study. At this

point, the students made suggestions about which topics they wanted to study. Some of them chose to delve deeper into the topics they were already studying, while others chose completely new categories. Now that the structure and task were clear, the students were able to take more control. This was the only way it seemed they would have a chance to experiment with an essential element of democracy, the dilemma of self versus group, and to find value in working together.

Indeed, I did not only have to call into question my classroom management style, but the entire execution of my curriculum. I had counted on my first year's work to relieve me of much of the curriculum planning in my second year. While I certainly had less work to do on my curriculum and I had a much clearer picture of what I wanted to accomplish, I still needed to do some serious work to adjust my plans to best fit this particular group of students. I made my directions more specific, shortened full-group lessons, and added more structure to small-group work, including a list of rules and a selection of which children would work together. Overall, I used less group work and more individual work in my second year, with more direction from me in the beginning of activities.

In the midst of my realization that my second year might not be any easier than my first year, I remembered one of the meetings I had had with my advisor and my cooperating teacher when I was a student teacher. In that meeting, my advisor asked my cooperating teacher if his job had gotten easier in the course of the five years he'd been teaching the same age level. He replied, " Well, in some ways yes, but then again, I still work every Sunday." At the time I hadn't thought much about this comment. In my second year of teaching, I realized just how important it was. My second year allowed me to understand what seems now to be a fact of teaching: while teachers usually get better at their jobs from year to year, the job may never get much easier. It was just as valuable a lesson to learn how much I didn't know in my second year as it had been to learn what I did know in my first.

As I discovered, groups of children will always be different from year to year, either subtly or, in my case, greatly. With time, I traded a focus on the skills that had become second nature, such as my "teacher voice," for more in-depth questions, like how to use that voice. This act of delving more deeply into teaching skills happens on many fronts. While a first- or second-year teacher may be concentrating on doing only what needs to be done in the curriculum, a more experienced teacher, having mastered that part of the curriculum, will turn to the subtleties of how to make the program work best for the greatest number of students. They may provide more individual attention and often devote more time to thinking about each individual student. In fact, in the Marck School, the people who work late and on the weekends are more often the more experi-

enced teachers. Thankfully, even though I did not have an easier time with my second year, I was able to give my students more individual attention. I worked hard to keep all the students intellectually engaged, even when our work as a group was suffering. I also got to know each child more deeply and was better able to understand his/her needs and personality. For a few students who found it frightening when I raised my voice, I worked out a signal that let them prepare for those times. Not only did this alleviate their stress, but it also brought us closer on a more personal level.

It may be that when teaching feels noticeably easier, it will be a sign that I have stopped trying to delve deeper and stopped paying attention to the differences in each child and group of children. While I know that I have grown as a teacher, I am glad that my job doesn't feel much easier. It's clear to me now that teaching is always a work in progress. Even as I am acquiring more and more skills, activities, and strategies for teaching children, I have also come to realize that each year represents a certain kind of starting over.

**WRONG PLACE, RIGHT TIME**

rachel mazor

*RACHEL MAZOR '02 is a graduate of the Bank Street Graduate School program in Early Adolescent Education. She is currently teaching English in grades 9–12 at the Solomon Schechter High School of New York, and is engaged to Jonathan Edmonds (Bank Street Graduate School, Early Childhood and Elementary Education '04).*

My first real job out of college lasted exactly six days. I was working in the development office of a New York City synagogue, and my boss took me to visit the congregation's Hebrew school. When I saw the teachers completely absorbed in their work with the students, I knew immediately that I, too, was meant to work with young people. I'd had glimmers of this understanding before—I remember feeling proud when my high school teacher praised the way I explained difficult concepts to my classmates, and I knew I enjoyed working at summer camps—but it was only when I stepped into the school building that I realized with certainty where I was meant to be. I gave notice and tried to find a job— any job—that involved teaching. In the next few years, I found many. While none of these jobs turned out to be exactly the right teaching placement for me, I now believe that having these diverse experiences was the best way to begin my career.

When I started, it didn't matter what age, setting, or subject I taught—I just knew I had to get involved in the educational process in a direct way. This was before I enrolled at Bank Street, when I was still testing the waters of teaching. My career goals weren't focused beyond that, and, as a result, I ended up working in three distinctly different environments over the course of two years: I taught sixth-grade math, pre-school social studies, and first-grade reading. Each of these experiences taught me specific skills that I later applied to assignments; additionally, each experience helped me develop my own style as a teacher.

My first job was as a part-time assistant in a sixth-grade class at a Jewish day school on New York City's Upper West Side. I was hired mid-way through the school year, after doing some substitute teaching in the school. I worked primarily with the math and history teacher, although I also got involved in composing and directing the class play. I had worked with eleven-year-olds before, at summer camp, but my own memories of being a sixth grader were hazy. I recalled it as being a "lost year" of bad fashion and awkward socializing. I had no idea how much sophisticated academic content was covered in the sixth grade.

The kids surprised me with their questions, their insights, their connections, and the things they noticed about the world. The social studies curriculum dealt with the Holocaust and the American slave trade. Seeing children grapple with and react to the complex ethical issues raised by these somber periods in history helped me to understand how even young people try to make meaning of the often-senseless realities of our world. What impressed me most was the way that the group teacher guided discussions and prepared the students for the troubling material to come. She knew what would upset the children, and how to help them channel their feelings into safe and productive learning experiences.

At the same time, I was also working for a Brooklyn-based environmental group, leading workshops in pre-kindergarten classes in places like Flatlands and Gerritsen Beach, areas I never knew existed. These students could not have been more different from the sixth graders whom I taught. Aside from the age difference, they were growing up in near-suburban communities by the ocean. Unlike the savvy Manhattanites at the Jewish day school, some of these kids had never seen a skyscraper. This made my job challenging, as I was ostensibly there to teach them about "the urban environment." The program director had given me a set curriculum of four lessons aimed at teaching about such architectural phenomena such as brownstones, apartment buildings, and, yes, skyscrapers. Since most of these preschoolers lived in single- or dual-family houses, it was a stretch to ask them to build a high-rise out of blocks. After the first few stabs at forcing this curriculum on the bewildered four-year-olds, I asked one of the Pre-K teachers for advice. She encouraged me to begin taking liberties with the lesson plans, focusing instead on architectural elements with which they were familiar—roof shingles and porches, chain-link fences and driveways. I suppose this was my introduction to the idea of a child-centered curriculum, although I was not yet fluent in the language of Bank Street.

After a year of patching together two part-time jobs (and wearing out my Metrocard with all that commuting), I decided to get a "normal " teaching job—preferably one with health insurance. I took a position at a Manhattan independent school, where I assisted in two first-grade classrooms. This job bore some resemblance to my work at the Jewish day school, although the children were, of course, much younger; still, being a full-time assistant teacher was a new experience.

For the first time, I got to see a class (two classes, really) from the first day of school to the last. The year before, as a workshop instructor, I spent four days in each classroom before moving on to a new school and a new group of children. This year, I got to know the two group teachers and had a chance to see how much planning goes into designing even the simplest lesson. Like many people new to the field, I had

assumed that teachers gave children books to read and perhaps helped them pronounce the big words. Now I saw that teachers had to develop extension activities, make lists of sight-words, and pay close attention to the types of mistakes the children made in order to assess their growth. I had enough trouble getting the laminator to work, let alone planning a curriculum that was engaging, educational, and developmentally appropriate. I don't suppose I had ever thought teaching would be easy, but I never guessed just how much work it would be.

Many aspects of teaching took me a while to master, but one thing was clear from my first few minutes in a classroom. I knew that teaching was my calling. There was something about each of my classroom experiences that reinforced this belief, something that told me I was on the right track. No matter where I was, whenever I managed to explain a difficult concept, I felt that same sense of accomplishment I had first experienced in high school. Still, while I treasured each of my first three jobs, none felt quite "perfect." I liked working in middle school, but I didn't want to teach math. I liked being a specialist, but I wanted to work with the same class for an entire year. I liked being in an independent school, but I wanted to work with older students. By the end of my first two years in teaching, I had a much clearer idea of what I wanted to do: I wanted to work in an environment that combined the best of all of my jobs. Now, six years into my career, I am a high school English teacher at another Jewish day school. I work with older students, specializing in my favorite subject, and because I am in a very small school, I stay with many of the same students for several years.

In the intervening years, I had jobs working in public and independent schools, grades four through twelve, teaching math, drama, science, and humanities. When I tell my current colleagues how I got started, many of them shake their heads in amazement. They ask some version of the same question: "How could you go from middle school to preschool to first grade—and end up here?" When I first quit my office job, I knew I wanted to teach something to someone somewhere—it just took a while to figure what, to whom, and where. Many of the people with whom I now work started off teaching in independent high schools and have never considered teaching in other kinds of environments or with different grade levels. While I respect their ability to know early on what they wanted to do, I'm glad I had the chance to explore numerous paths. Having worked in several independent schools, I have seen different approaches to report writing, discipline, professional development, and curriculum design. I've been able to observe what works (and what doesn't), and to share the things I've picked up along the way with my colleagues.

Most importantly, however, I've seen how many traits good teachers have in common, no matter what they teach or where they teach it. Good teachers help their

students to think critically about the world, to ask questions, to look deeply, and, at times, to experience outrage. Good teachers tailor the curriculum to their students' needs instead of forcing them to engage in meaningless study. Good teachers plan carefully and work hard to make sure that every aspect of their students' experience is rich and productive. Good teachers know how to use the laminator.

I've also realized that my interests as a teacher have carried across my diverse experiences. I incorporate drama and art activities into my teaching, whether my students are turning their bodies into shapes or rewriting Shakespeare in contemporary dialogue. I look for ways to appeal to my students' senses of humor, whether I am telling first graders knock-knock jokes at lunch or using *The Simpsons* to teach tenth graders about satire. I have developed a reputation as a demanding, enthusiastic teacher, equally equipped with strict rules and silly games. I have found that a balanced diet makes for a safe and warm classroom for students of any age.

I still find myself reflecting on my first experiences as a teacher. Now, when my tenth graders read *Things Fall Apart*, a novel about British imperialism in Nigeria, I remember how my sixth graders struggled to understand human cruelty, and how their teacher acknowledged their anger without allowing them to feel hopeless. When my twelfth graders don't understand a story about Dominican girls who rebel by dating white boys, I think back to the advice of the pre-kindergarten teacher and relate the ideas to something more familiar to my students—the way their families feel about their dating non-Jews. When I devise a ninth-grade homework assignment, I remember how carefully the group teachers gave instructions to first graders, and check to make sure that my directions are clear.

Throughout my experiences, my desire to be a teacher has never wavered. I still love to explain things to people. I've been lucky to have worked with students of many ages and backgrounds, and to have taught many different subjects. All these experiences have helped me figure out what kind of teacher I want to be. I have learned a lot about being a good teacher no matter what the setting. Six years into my teaching career, I realize that spending a few years in the "wrong" schools can be invaluable preparation for the "right" one.

## LEARNING TO KEEP MY HEART OPEN

marika paez

*MARIKA PAEZ started her teaching career six years ago through Teach for America. After working in various schools in the South Bronx and Harlem, in New York City, this year she became a staff developer for the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University.*

I tend to look back on my first year of teaching with a mixture of horror, disbelief, and awe. I started teaching through Teach for America, an organization that recruits recent college graduates without education degrees to work for two years in under-resourced school districts all around the country. My inspiration for moving across the country to teach in the South Bronx came, in part, from having had opportunities in college to work side-by-side with teachers in inner-city schools who were brilliantly and passionately able to work with groups of young people to not only teach them subject matter, but also to weave them into a caring community of people who supported and sustained one another. I suppose I began to imagine that my future classroom could be like one in a made-for-TV movie, in which I would be able to inspire and motivate a group of young people not only to achieve incredible academic feats, but also to have ultimate personal fulfillment.

Then, after a six-week summer training session given by Teach for America, I arrived at my second-grade classroom at PS 162 in the South Bronx. My students were needy, demanding…some of them hostile. My made-for-TV movie vision of teaching flew right out the window as I struggled daily to get twenty-eight wiggling bodies to do anything all together, at the same time—line up, get out math books, drink water. I saw many teachers around me who got "control" of their students by using threats, intimidation, and the occasional reward of a sticker or two. I must admit that, seeing this as a model, and feeling desperate to gain some semblance of management in my classroom, I tried these methods as well. I cried almost every day in frustration over my ineffectiveness. I was overwhelmed and discouraged. I wonder now, after six years of experience teaching in the public schools and having obtained my master's degree, how I ever survived that first year, much less agreed to do it all over again the following year.

Though my memories of those first two years of teaching second grade in a South Bronx elementary school are mostly a blur, there is one incident that stands out for me—the day my class, and one student, in particular, helped me begin to discover what it truly means to be a teacher. Malik and his classmates helped me learn that the job of a teacher requires much more than to be an organized dispenser of curriculum or

an efficient manager of individuals. Rather, it requires being a person who can stay in the moment, listen carefully, respond authentically, and thoughtfully guide students closer to becoming their own best selves.

Malik had a shy smile and a perpetually averted gaze. He was the kind of kid that a teacher would work hard to "bring out of his shell." I would tell jokes and watch to see if he laughed. I would tease him playfully, trying to get him to smile. Looking back, I think I sensed that Malik wasn't quite comfortable in the classroom and I so wanted to put him at ease. I picture him now as he was at the beginning of the year, shifting often in his seat, slow and reluctant to start his work, not confident about reading or writing, easily embarrassed in front of other children.

Starting around January, Malik began to have angry and violent outbursts, mostly directed at other children. I changed his seat to a table with the most docile children in the class, but he continued to act out, often unprovoked—kicking children, pushing them, grabbing their notebooks off of their desks while they wrote. Gradually, these outbursts became more frequent and prolonged.

I wasn't sure what to do. I tried everything I could think of at the time. I tried punishing him for his disruptive and hurtful behavior. I tried to persuade him to behave by using rewards—stickers or special treats. I tried speaking with his mom. But it eventually became clear that these rages were uncontrollable for him. I was frustrated and scared. I wanted all of my students to feel safe in my classroom, yet I was unable to control or even predict Malik's behavior, so how could I keep my students safe?

One day during math, Malik had a particularly intense fight with another student, jumping on a boy and pummeling him with his fists. I called another teacher for help in removing Malik from the classroom. As I held his arms to lead him out of the room, he fought and struggled against me, screaming, "Get off me! Get off me!" When I finally returned to the classroom, I was exhausted and on the verge of tears. I took one look at my students—staring at me wide-eyed, some scared, some in shock, math books still open—and I thought, "We can't go on like this." I knew that we couldn't go on as a class continuing to ignore Malik and his behavior. It had become too big. I didn't know how to approach it or how to deal with it, but I knew that I couldn't go on with "business as usual." We needed to talk about what was happening with Malik. So, I called my first class meeting.

As we gathered on the rug, I worried about how it might go. I was scared that I didn't know the "right" way to go about conducting the meeting. Should Malik be present or not? If we talked about him behind his back, would the discussion negatively affect how we all saw Malik? I wanted desperately to hear what the children were thinking, how they felt about the situation, and what they thought should be done.

Once we assembled on the rug, I explained briefly that I wanted to talk about what just happened and about how the children were feeling. I asked if anyone wanted to start. A few hands were raised and then a few more, as students started to share how they felt when Malik hit them or teased them. Some of them expressed confusion about why Malik was acting this way. Some expressed concern for me, saying that he shouldn't treat me that way. When the children were done, I added that I, too, felt very sad about Malik's behavior, because I cared about him and I knew he was having a hard time controlling his anger. I also said that I was concerned because I wanted every child in my class to feel safe and I knew it was hard to feel safe when Malik acted this way.

Then I asked the children if they had any ideas about what we could do. Some students suggested various punishments Malik should get for acting up. Most students seemed at a loss. Then one student, Natalie, spoke up, "Maybe if we tell Malik how we feel, he will know that it hurts us when he acts this way. Then he won't do it anymore." A couple of students nodded. I asked the class if they would be willing to talk to Malik to help him understand how they felt. They agreed that this was a good idea, and I went to get Malik. I was worried. Would it seem to Malik like we were "ganging up" on him? How was he going to react to what kids said? Would the children say things that were appropriate and thoughtful? How was I going to bring closure to the meeting?

Malik entered the room with his head hanging low, and his arms crossed over his chest. He sat down in the circle with us, and I invited some students to share what they had said before, about their feelings about Malik's actions. The students were amazingly gentle and mature as they told Malik how they felt. They seemed to realize as much as I did how fragile Malik was. After several students had shared, I asked Malik if he had anything he wanted to say.

We waited for what seemed to be an eternity while Malik sat in silence, his head hanging down, eyes piercing the floor. Finally, he stood up. He walked over to the boy he had pummeled earlier in the day and reached down to shake his hand, mumbling, "I'm sorry." As he gripped the boy's hand, he bent down even lower and embraced him with his other arm, patting the boy on the back. Malik then went to each student who had shared what they felt and did the same, shaking their hands and giving them each a hug. The room erupted into spontaneous applause, as all the students jumped up to hug Malik, and each other. It was an moment that I will never forget.

When I reflect on this experience now, I realize that this was a significant moment in my teaching. On this day, perhaps for the first time in my short teaching career, I was able to turn off all the "teacher" voices in my head. I had been able to stop thinking and planning how I was going to teach this or that lesson or "use" this or that moment, and, instead, to be emotionally authentic, to truly listen, and to put my full trust in my students.

On the day of that class meeting, I could not possibly have planned for what was in store. An important lesson I learned that day was the value of uncertainty, of "not knowing." As a teacher, and especially as a new teacher, it's easy to feel pressured to "know" how to handle every situation that comes up, from minor first aid to major tragedy. But this is impossible; uncertainty is a part of almost every teaching and learning interaction. And it is this uncertainty, this "not knowing," that forced me to be open and present in that moment, to see my students without preconceived notions, to consider roles for us other than "all-knowing teacher" and "know-nothing student." On that day, not knowing what to do opened me up to consider my students as individuals and as people, and to respond with them to the situation at hand.

Up until this moment, I had been trying to handle Malik's behavior on my own. I was trying hard to be the teacher who "had everything under control." I had not considered having a class meeting to discuss with my students what was going on with Malik, and I certainly didn't know when the time came, what they would say, how Malik would react, or if this spontaneous decision was appropriate for the situation. Because of my own inexperience with what to do in such an intense situation, I was forced to trust the children and to rely on them as partners in trying to figure out how to resolve the situation. Whether out of desperation, instinct, or a combination of the two, I felt compelled to trust them, that they would be fair in their judgments of Malik, that they would be emotionally open with each other and with me, and that they would show Malik both compassion and honesty.

Although I was unconscious of it at the time, one of the reasons I was so deeply unhappy as a teacher in those first years is because I was failing to live up to my vision of what teaching and learning could and should be. My "voice" as a teacher was essentially one of control through manipulation—a system of punishments and rewards that didn't reflect the kind of emotionally honest community I longed to build. This experience with Malik and his classmates opened a door for me and provided a new model of managing and resolving classroom issues. Although some students had responded to the punishment and reward system I had initially set up, I began to see even more students responding to class meetings and community problem-solving. I began to see how my "voice" as a teacher could develop into one that more closely matched my "voice" as a person. By becoming more emotionally authentic with my students, I became a teacher who was able to manage her class by building community and trust among students. I became a teacher who told her students how she honestly felt about things and encouraged them to do the same.

While I do think that it's important for me to model emotional authenticity, I don't think it's enough; if children are to be able to successfully negotiate conflicts inde-

pendently, they need to be explicitly taught some ways to express their feelings and given multiple opportunities to practice. In my classroom, I begin by giving them language they can use when someone hurts them, such as making "I-statements." We also learn and practice conflict-resolution protocol—naming the hurtful action, how it makes you feel, and what needs to happen next. Children begin to take on the language independently, saying things like, "When you hit me, I feel mad. I need you to use your words to tell me something." We practice active listening during every part of the school day, so that students gradually become aware of the importance of body language and thoughtful response in good communication. For example, during discussions of a read-aloud book, students are explicitly taught to ask questions to clarify confusion, and to disagree with another's point of view respectfully.

Honoring emotions also plays a part in the more "academic" parts of the classroom curriculum. Our daily writing workshop has become a place for students to bring both the big and small moments of their lives and share them with each other and with me. One child wrote a beautiful story that shared her feelings about living with a chronically ill mother. Another child was able to use poetry to examine the conflicting feelings he had about his parents' divorce. When I conduct my one-on-one writing conferences, I focus on responding first to the writer and the importance of the story he or she is telling, and then on the writing. I push myself to remember that sitting before me is a person, and it is my responsibility as a teacher to help children develop as a person and not just as a "student" or a "writer." I cherish and prioritize writing workshop because it provides daily opportunities for my students to be vulnerable and to be known by others. It provides all of us an opportunity to be pulled more closely together into a community in which we love and support one another.

Becoming attuned to twenty-two or more sets of emotional needs is difficult, and I certainly can't say that I've successfully mastered it. I am not always as emotionally transparent as I could be, and I don't always listen to students as carefully as I should. I am still not always sure of the best ways to value children's emotions in the classroom, or how often it's important to stop and process what's happened. But I do know that when I am blind to children's emotions in the classroom because I am trying to rush on to the activity at hand, I miss valuable teachable moments.

In the end, I didn't have ultimate control over what happened to Malik. After one of his numerous suspensions for fighting at lunchtime, he didn't return to my class. He went, instead, to a special education class in another part of the school as a "trial." The trial extended the entire year. His going was silent, but his absence was palpable. We occasionally still saw him around school, and he would smile shyly and duck his head when I asked how he was doing. Sometimes I saw him running in the hallways with a couple of other boys, or heard him screaming upstairs.

At the end of the year, I encouraged my students to think about what we had done that year, to reminisce about good times. Several students brought up Malik, and Natalie remembered back to the class meeting we had "when Malik said he was sorry and we all hugged."

Although I will never know the impact, if any, I had on Malik, I will never forget the impact he and his classmates had on me. The fantasy world I still had of teaching and learning was eradicated and I was forced to confront the messy, sometimes ugly, sometimes wonderful reality of children as emotional beings. In one of my favorite passages about teaching, Parker Palmer (1998) writes, "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require." (p. 11) Approaching teaching in this way is not easy; it's a courageous act, requiring one to be open and authentic with students. However, it is in the moments when I open myself up, trust and truly listen to my students, that I discover we can all rise beautifully to the occasion.

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## NORMALIZING THE NEED FOR HELP: WHAT ALL TEACHERS NEED

nancy gropper

*NANCY GROPPER is a member of the Graduate School faculty at Bank Street College of Education, where she currently serves as Director of the Pre-service Program in Early Childhood and Elementary Education. She has worked as an evaluator for a variety of educational projects, and has conducted research on gender issues at the early childhood level. She received a doctorate in Early Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University.*

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.nsrfharmony.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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