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# ESL Mentoring: An Empowering Tool

Maria Cristina Tur

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# **ESL MENTORING: AN EMPOWERING TOOL**

BY

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B.A. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA OF BARCELONA 1984

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## Abstract

The purpose of this IPP will be a qualitative case study of the mentoring program at Hostos Community College, City University of New York. I will learn the workings of the mentoring program. I will examine the mentor's role and strategies in helping her two protégés. I will reflect upon the relevance of a Mentoring Program as a tool in facilitating the acquisition of ESL. Finally, I will explain the advisor/advisee program at Intermediate School 184 in the South Bronx in whose pilot program I participated.

### Eric Descriptors:

Bilingualism  
English (Second Language)  
Student Teacher Relationship  
Cultural Influences  
Cultural Conflict  
Social Values

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I was born in 1961 in Menorca, a Spanish island located in the Mediterranean. Throughout its history Menorca has been an isolated island. Its enclave is obscured from the world. Invading navies landed; other civilizations imposed their will and departed, each time leaving the island to its old ways – to the wind, the sun and the sea.

In Menorca I grew up in an oppressive society where my voice was stifled by a dictatorial regime. I was not allowed to use my native language, Menorquin, at school. I was forced to speak Spanish. Teachers lectured and students regurgitated what they were told. I was never encouraged to express personal opinions. I experienced “banking education” throughout my learning process. It was understood that the teacher knew “all” and the students knew nothing. The teacher, therefore, chose the program content, taught it, and enforced discipline. The students adapted to program content, listened to that which they were taught, and complied with discipline. I was no exception.

I came to the United States seeking a different way of living while searching for answers in my quest to become a better teacher. When I arrived in the United States on my tourist visa, I began to seek employment. Many doors were closed to me, however, due to the fact that I lacked a working permit. Nonetheless, I obtained a position as Bilingual Coordinator at the School Volunteer Program (SVP). With this position I was granted a working permit.

Upon receiving my resident alien card I was permitted to teach at LaGuardia Community College. When I started teaching ESL at LaGuardia's Adult Learning evening program in Queens, NY, I had already experienced the same trials and tribulations facing many of my students. I had gone through the challenges facing an immigrant attempting to become a "legal resident alien". I was therefore sensitized to some of the problems facing many of my students. Although they had a "voice" which needed an "ear", the majority of them were disempowered because of a language barrier. English language proficiency was perceived as the means to a better quality of life. My job was to find a channel by which their "voice" could be heard. I thought that ESL Mentoring could be that channel. Several years later a friend of mine, who was teaching at Hostos, told me about the Mentoring Program for ESL students that was being piloted at Hostos. I chose to study this Mentor Program to determine both its structure and its impact on student success at Hostos.

In the next section I will describe the context and the Mentoring Program design at Hostos.

### **Mentoring at Hostos Community College**

Hostos Community College, a component of the City University of New York, is located in the South Bronx. Its student body is composed predominantly of poor and working class Hispanic and Afro-American students, the majority of whom are adults who have been out of school for several years. Many are single mothers who must handle ongoing personal challenges, such as child care, poverty, homelessness, and the demands of the social service system, while maintaining an ongoing course of college

study. To meet the academic needs of these non-English-speaking adult learners, the college offers a bilingual approach designed to fill existing gaps in their basic education while helping them to obtain college level skills. The Hostos vision of bilingual education is one designed for the "non-traditional" culturally deprived students so that they may become as productively employed after graduation as their middle class English-speaking counterparts.

This bilingual program is a course of study utilizing both Spanish and English as media of instruction. The approach is based on the premise that academic growth and development are accomplished most effectively when students are given the opportunity to acquire skills in their native language and to develop mastery of them while developing skills in a second language. The Spanish-speaking student receives instruction in Spanish and takes content courses in Spanish, while concurrently developing English skills through an intensive English-as-a- Second-Language (ESL) program. The skills developed in the ESL program enable students to eventually take content courses in English. Following graduation from Hostos, those students proficient in Spanish are expected to continue their studies in English. This format is a marked contrast to that which is expected of English speaking students who take content courses in their native English and are encouraged to study Spanish only as a foreign language.

The Office of Academic Affairs Subcommittee on Retention created a Faculty/Staff Mentoring Corps Program for the first time during the Spring 1995 semester at Hostos. The purpose of this Mentoring Corps Program was to increase student retention and to facilitate an ongoing developmental apparatus designed to help students effectively utilize the college student services, such as academic advisement,



career development, financial aid, emergency food and housing, student activities, student government, orientation, counseling, and help for disabled students, etc. The Faculty/staff mentors would work one on one with their protégés throughout the semester to help them meet the challenges inherent in their individual situations. For example, they could refer students-in-need to a variety of other college assistance programs and could provide information about the Hostos Center for Women's and Immigrants' Rights, and the Hostos Children's Center.

The Office of Academic Affairs Subcommittee on Retention also established a Mentoring Corps Steering Committee. This committee was composed of six-eight faculty/staff mentors and student representatives. The Steering Committee's function was to facilitate communication among mentors and to develop strategies for improving their work with protégés throughout the semester. The Committee developed a series of tips and suggestions for mentors, which dealt with subjects such as dialogue, listening, obtaining information, record-keeping, availability for meetings, communication, etc. It convened twice each month and worked closely with the Office of Academic Affairs' Mentor/Coordinator in arranging Study Skills and Time Management workshops for students, and prepared other relevant campus activities designed to enhance their work with protégés.

Now in its third year of operation, the Mentoring program at Hostos has established an ongoing process for mentors and their protégés. Each semester the Coordinator of the Mentoring Program distributes invitations to all faculty and staff at Hostos, requesting their services as Mentors. Prospective participants must complete a brief profile designed to assist the coordinator of the program in matching mentors with

protégés. The profile includes such information as languages spoken in addition to English, areas of expertise, schedule of availability for mentoring, etc. Approximately sixty to seventy faculty and staff members volunteer to be Mentors each semester at Hostos. They are representative of the various college divisions including Academic Affairs, Planning, Student Services, and Administration and are, therefore, able to help their proteges utilize the support services available to them.

Mentors commit approximately one hour each week to mentoring, although this varies from week to week depending on a student's current needs. Additional time may be given for occasional group meetings. Mentors generally work with the same student(s) throughout the semester, and often work with them for more than one semester. In the event that a mentor-protégé relationship is a non-productive one, either participant may contact the Mentor Coordinator for reassignment.

Any student, entering freshman or upperclassman, whom the program can assist by providing opportunities to clarify goals, obtaining information about available services, and overcoming feelings of isolation and alienation, is invited to participate. Students on academic probation are also among those included in the Hostos Mentoring Program. Although they are encouraged to participate, it is not required of them. Faculty members are invited to refer for mentoring students whom they perceive as having academic or personal difficulties with their course work. Selected students receive a letter and a questionnaire for completion and return to the Office of Academic Affairs at the beginning of each semester. The letter of invitation describes the mentoring program to prospective students, and the accompanying questionnaire asks their reasons for wanting a mentor, their schedules of availability for meetings with

mentors, as well as information about personal interests and hobbies. They are also invited to participate in a mentoring orientation designed to provide them with an understanding of the program and what is expected of them. Specific guidelines given to them include attending meetings on schedule, consulting with mentors on important decisions which are pending, and availing themselves of all support services suggested by mentors. It is most important, of course, for the protégés to participate in a whole-hearted manner to fully benefit from the mentor/protégé relationship.

The criteria for matching mentor with protégé include mutual interests and the level of the mentor's expertise in the area(s) of the protégé's academic need(s). Each mentor subsequently receives a copy of the protégé's profile and arranges to meet with him or her for the first time, as soon as possible. Initially, mentors and protégés focus on specific goals related to academic achievement or staying in school. Improving attendance, tutoring for a particular course, improving study skills, and personal counseling are among the topics of initial focus. As the relationship develops, mentors learn more about their protégés' career aspirations and are able to guide them appropriately.

At the end of each semester, mentors are given a questionnaire to complete for purposes of effectiveness evaluation. It requests basic data such as quantity of time spent with protégés, mentors' opinions on the benefits derived by their protégés from the meetings, and suggestions from mentors for strengthening the program. This questionnaire is the only tool developed thus far for measuring the success of the program.

In the next chapter I will provide a closer look at one mentor's work with her protégés. This case study is intended to examine and evaluate the impact of the mentor/protégé relationship on the students' success.

## CHAPTER 2

### CASE STUDY, METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

I believe that a case study qualitative research approach is the most suitable method for evaluating the mentor's role and the strategies used to help the protégés. There are three tenets of the qualitative method: describing, understanding, and explaining. I will apply these three principles to the case study of the Mentoring Program at Hostos Community College.

In her book *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach* Merriam (1988: 12) contends:

The qualitative case study is a particularly suitable methodology for dealing with critical problems of practice and extending the knowledge base of various aspects of education. Thoughtful counselors, administrators, and instructors are vitally interested in the questions that emerge in their daily work life. A case study approach is often the best methodology for addressing these problems in which understanding is sought in order to improve practice.

Being in agreement with her premise, I chose this methodology for observing specific behavioral patterns between mentor and protégé while describing any factors that could affect the second language acquisition process.

Yin (1994: 20) identifies four specific components which are essential to the design of a case study. I have included these components in the study of the Mentor Program at Hostos Community College. They are:

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- Its propositions: study questions
- Its unit(s) of analysis
- The logic linking the data to the propositions
- The criteria for interpreting the findings

The “study questions” are most likely to ask “how” and “why”. Articulation of the questions is the first task of the researcher. My study questions are “How does the Hostos Community College Mentoring Program work?” and “What are its benefits?”

The second component, the study’s “propositions” sometimes derive from the “how” and “why” questions, and are helpful in focusing on the overall goals. My study proposition reflects upon the relevance of a Mentoring Program as a tool in facilitating the acquisition of ESL.

The third component, the “unit of analysis” defines the case.

In this study, I examine the manner in which one mentor at Hostos Community College related to her two protégés during an entire semester.

My fieldwork is a qualitative study based on discussions with the mentor and observation and analysis of the interactions between the mentor and her protégés.

The study began in September 1996 and included tape-recording of all conversations between the mentor and her protégés. The conversations usually lasted an hour to an hour and a half. The conversations were conducted at the mentor’s office. Although I was present at the meetings, I tried to remain as objective and neutral as possible to



allow the protégés to be open about their concerns. I wanted them to feel comfortable revealing how they really felt without fear of judgment or reproach on my part.

Once the data was collected I began an analysis of the impact of the Mentor Program on these protégés. This analysis included an examination of the mentor's role, the strategies she used to help her protégés, as well as reflection on the relevance of a mentoring program as a tool in facilitating ESL.

### **Participants and Setting**

In this study the mentor was a female ESL professor in her mid-thirties who had been teaching ESL and English courses full-time at Hostos for 4 years. She had been a mentor since the inception of the program. One of her protégés was a forty-eight year old Dominican woman who had resided in the U.S. for twenty-seven years. Throughout the study, this protégé will be called Francisca (not her real name). At the time the research was conducted, Francisca reported that she had been studying English for the last twenty-nine years. She had transferred from another college, and had been attending Hostos for three semesters. Although Francisca was quite fluent in spoken English, she had serious difficulties with the written word. Her inability to write coherently and clearly and her subsequent frustration and discouragement seriously impeded her academic progress.

The second protégé was a thirty-six year old Honduran woman whom I will call Otilia (again, not her real name). Otilia had been living in the United States for five years and had been attending Hostos for four semesters as an ESL student. At the end of the study Otilia had completed most of the requirements for her major, but did not have enough mastery of the English language to complete the required course work in her

second language. She was living with her boyfriend and their son at the time and had another son in Honduras as well as custody of her deceased sister's daughter in Honduras. She worked full-time as a home health aide and had a second job on weekends taking care of an elderly person. She also went to school full-time in the evening. Otilia spoke Spanish at home.

The mentor met with each protégé separately and privately in her office at Hostos twice a week for the entire semester. The meetings were scheduled in the afternoon, in order to accommodate Francisca's morning schedule and Otilia's evening schedule. They would attend the meetings on the same day, consecutively. Meetings with each protégé would last approximately one hour. Having been given permission to attend these meetings as a non-participant observer, I would quietly tape these sessions and take notes. Evidently, believing that I was a second mentor for them, the two protégés felt comfortable in my presence and often turned to me for empathy and advice.

### **Data Presentation**

In order to examine and understand the mentor's role and strategies used to help her protégés, I found it useful to first categorize the issues each protégé brought to the mentoring sessions and then to analyze the advice provided by the mentor.

I grouped Francisca's issues into two main categories. The first category includes personal issues affecting her academic performance, and the second category includes separate academic issues.

Otilia's issues have been grouped into three categories: personal / job-related and academic. It should be noted that all 3 categories are closely interrelated.

The following table displays the data collected for each protégé along with the mentor's responses.

**FRANCISCA'S ISSUES****MENTOR'S RESPONSE**

<b>Academic</b>	<b>Academic</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bad grades in the past (Fs &amp; Ds) which she wanted to be changed to "incompletes"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spoke with a professor from the Nursing Department and was told that students with D's could not enter the program</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a low GPA which prevented acceptance in Nursing Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraged her to repeat the courses in which she had been graded poorly to improve her GPA</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• problems with teachers: she felt they had "something against her"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explained that when there is a complaint to be made about a teacher's behavior, it must be registered immediately</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conflicts with professors regarding coursework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helped her understand the requirements for the English class, and suggested she should see the tutor in the writing center more often</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frustration with Hostos: she was not taking courses in the major she wanted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asked her to bring her transcripts which were reviewed by a professor in the Nursing Program</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an expired nurse's aide license: she needed to take the nursing exam again if she wanted the license renewed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraged her to take the exam as soon as possible</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tardiness: although her classes did not start until 11:00 a.m., she often came late and missed part of a class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• told her to reflect upon the way she was structuring her time</li> </ul>
<b>Family Problems</b>	<b>Family Problems</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents: her father had died three semesters ago and her mother had suffered three strokes within that same time period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraged her to see a counselor and accompanied her to see the counselor on several occasions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stress: she wanted to join the Nursing Program; she felt she had only this semester to "fix" everything</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spent extra time talking to a professor in the Nursing Department and inquired about possible alternatives for one in Francisca's situation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• depression: cried a lot during the mentoring sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• empathized with Francisca's problems</li> </ul>

**OTILIA'S ISSUES****MENTOR'S RESPONSE**

<b>Academic</b>	<b>Academic</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>felt she was not making any progress even though she was repeating the ESL course</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>urged her to talk to her English instructor and to ask her for guidance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>felt she was being "discriminated against" in the college offices when she applied for a summer Math class and was never contacted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>found out about the availability of intersession Math courses for her</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>believed that the writing center in the college was not helpful to her, tutors were not available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>suggested she should go to the writing center and make appointments in advance, so that she could see the tutor of her choice</li> <li>gave her writing topics so that she could do extra writing</li> <li>helped her edit her papers</li> <li>encouraged her to read more in English</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>complained about the English teacher who was not revealing information on her status in the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>urged her to talk to her English instructor and to ask for guidance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>felt very nervous about her final exams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wrote a note to her tutor and spoke to</li> </ul>

	him about her on several occasions
<b>Personal</b>	<b>Personal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• her boyfriend, who spoke English well, refused to help her with her homework assignments</li> <li>• she had financial difficulties in supporting her child here as well as two other children back in Honduras; one of them was her deceased sister's daughter</li> <li>• her boyfriend also had other children to support from a previous marriage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• showed empathy and concern</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• she had problems with adoption papers for her deceased sister's daughter back in Honduras</li> <li>• she had lost her children's official immigration papers recently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• referred her for a visit to the Hostos Center for Women's and Immigrants Rights</li> </ul>
<b>Job-related</b>	<b>Job-related</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• as a home-health aide, she was exhausted by long weekday working hours and a second job on weekends</li> <li>• she had to commute for an hour and a half each day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advised her to reconsider her heavy working schedule</li> </ul>

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the person for whom she worked during the week was too demanding</li> </ul> |  |
|--|--|

### Data Analysis

The data presented in the preceding tables provides only a thumbnail sketch of the issues facing Francisca and Otilia at Hostos Community College. In order to examine the impact of their mentor's interventions and responses to their issues an expanded narrative account was needed. According to Merriam (1988: 127)

some case studies are little more than case records – basically descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under study that contain little analysis or interpretation of the data.

The material may even be presented according to the categories used to organize the raw data. What makes them case studies is the narrative structure used to present data

This narrative account of the findings represents a descriptive case study. The issues brought to the mentoring sessions by the protégés are described, and are followed by the mentor's responses to these issues. Active listening, effective communication, empathy and inquiry are among the strategies utilized by the mentor in guiding and advising her protégés.

Francisca's main issue was that she wanted to become a nurse but had too low a GPA to enter the Nursing Program. She had been given bad grades in the past, Fs and Ds, which she wanted changed to "incompletes." These grades were due in large part to the fact that she was forced to interrupt her education to care for her sick mother (who had suffered three strokes) in the Dominican Republic. The recent death of her father had doubled her burden. She was not aware that she should have informed the college of her family situation, so that



her grades could have been changed to Incomplete. She needed to present proof of her family situation in order for a review of her grades to take place. Unfortunately, she did not have any documents to corroborate her family situation.

Another issue bothering Francisca was the feeling of being treated in an inappropriate manner by one of her professors. While describing the manner in which she was treated by this professor, Francisca became distraught. The mentor responded with warmth and acceptance. The interchange between protégé and mentor, was as follows:

Francisca: *I begged her to check my work. She challenged me physically. She pushed me. I was told I should have complained. They don't care for the students. I had a bad experience.*

Mentor: *I hear that your teacher challenged you physically and pushed you. You seem very upset about it. Would it help you to talk about it?*

During another interchange with her other protégé, the mentor acknowledged Otilia's feelings of frustration and anger over the lack of response from college officials when she attempted to register for a math intersession course:

Mentor: *That's terrible. You should have received a response immediately. Are you still interested in intersession courses?*

The empathic words expressed by the mentor always reflected her protégé' tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Sometime the mentor's empathy was expressed in body language, alone, as was the case during Otilia's sharing of the circumstances surrounding the death of a sister. Otilia emotionally reported that a few days prior to the death, her sister had called to beg that she care for her six year old daughter. The mentor and I were in tears along with Otilia, during this intense interchange.

One could say that Francisca and Otilia were just "ventilating" their frustrations with their academic situation; and expressing the pain of a father's death and a mother's strokes (in Francisca's case) and the pain of a sister's death (in Otilia's case). According to Curran and even Freud, however, these very emotional conversations may well have had an impact on Francisca and Otilia's language learning.

According to Curran (1978:17)

When we ask what is helpful in a communication we need to look carefully at the nature of the words that are used. Certain words for example, encapsulate and communicate emotion. While such emotional expression is helpful as a relief, we seem to be no farther along than we were before with that simple type of word-ventilation.

We seem to need such expression over and over again if those are the only words we have, and that is the only language we can use. But to gain in self-other understanding, to arrive at better self-other evaluation and so finally to direct ourselves to more adequate choices or, alternatively, to be at peace with the choices we have made, words and concepts more cognitively symbolic are needed.

Freud proposed that the structure of the unconscious was a linguistic structure. Conscious thought is, of course, molded on a linguistic structure. Imageless or wordless thought, if it exists, still demands cognitive linguistic symbols for clearer understanding and expression. Conscious thought requires words and language. But somatic, instinctual, emotional thought-feeling, insofar as one tries to express them, also need language. I may call it pain, anxiety, discomfort or whatever. By such word formulation, I do something that seems to remove a part of the chaotic effect that these feelings have on me. But I seem only to get control of the ability to direct these impulses when I have provided myself

with adequate word symbols that are cognitive and not simply emotional. In this way, I cease to be a victim of these impulses. When one gets an adequate affective image that pulls together his or her inner disorganization by way of a satisfactory word analogy, one begins to assume direction and control.

In other words Francisca and Otilia may have actually acquired language through these conversations with their mentor, driven to express their emotions and their pain. They needed "adequate word symbols" to do so. In a one on one dialogue the mentor could facilitate this expression.

I believe that Francisca and Otilia needed to pour out their pain before being able to move on with their academic life. The mentor was the tool providing the "adequate affective image" which enabled the protégés to take the necessary steps to "assume direction and control". Francisca decided to repeat the courses in which she had received bad grades in order to improve her GPA. Otilia reconsidered her heavy working schedule. She decided not to work on weekends so that she could have more time for her studies.

The mentor was able to create an atmosphere of shared openness and understanding, establishing the foundation for a successful mentor/protégé relationship. Once such a relationship is established, second language acquisition is very likely to evolve through creative communication. Curran (1978: 41) describes such a relationship in this way:

the learner, in seeking knowledge from the knower, attempts to understand him in his effort to communicate what he knows. As a skilled counselor, the learner puts aside his own judgments and preconceived notions so that they do not get in the way of his understanding the communication of the knower. The knower, being thus received with an attitude of acceptance and even graciousness, is not threatened by the awareness derived from his own experience; on the contrary, he is rewarded in being able to share these awarenesses and the learner is rewarded in being the beneficiary of them.

Never losing sight of her role as advisor and guide, the mentor always responded or intervened with neither approval nor disapproval of the behaviors and attitudes displayed by her protégés. She told me that in some instances she felt compelled to provide answers to her protégés' issues. She would either give advice, offer suggestions, or provide information after a question-answer exchange. For example on one occasion when Francisca was complaining about a previous professor who had humiliated her in front of the class, the mentor calmly suggested the following:

Mentor: *When you have a problem with a teacher, you have to complain immediately from now on. Don't be shy to talk about it.*

On another occasion when Otilia expressed her frustration with writing assignments, the mentor objectively responded as follows:

Mentor: *You should visit the writing center more often. Try to schedule the appointments ahead of time with the tutor you like.*

The mentor also took steps to assist her protégés outside their regular meetings. On many occasions she approached college colleagues pedagogically involved with Francisca and Otilia, to ascertain her protégés' strengths and weaknesses and to discuss means of assisting them with the latter. The protégés were most appreciative of this intervention, given the difficulties they often encountered with the academic bureaucracy.

The protégés felt understood because the mentor actively listened to them. The mentor did not merely repeat what the protégés had said, but reflected back on what she thought they meant without any judgments being made. The mentor neither conveyed approval nor disapproval. Curran (1978: 52) views understanding as:

a process in which one person attempts to enter into the world of another and respond to it non-judgmentally. This process seems best to occur between persons when the one understanding can free himself of any tendency to agree or disagree with the other, or to offer him advice or additional information. To the extent that this entering-in process is effective, the one being understood is gradually able to move toward a greater freedom from conflict, anxiety, and self-defeating modes of behavior. He or she can then arrive at awarenesses about themselves that are more adequate to the persons they really are. This results in a more secure and peaceful acceptance of themselves and, as a result, more realistic goals.

The protégés felt empowered to move on. Their voice mattered. They just needed to prioritize their goals considering their demanding lives. The mentor's strategy of guidance and advice often expanded into direct instructional intervention. For example, she helped Otilia with the editing of her writing assignment on one occasion and clarified for Francisca the seemingly nebulous requirements of an English course on another occasion. In follow-up to such direct intervention, the mentor's role of "advisor/guide" would always come back into play. After having helped Otilia correct her paper, for example, the mentor advised her to visit the writing center and outlined a series of writing problems on which she needed to work.

It was easy to deduce that the success of the mentor's advice and guidance had been dependent on the integration of empathetic listening and communication into her role. The mentor established an atmosphere of non-defensive learning, that is the protégés did not feel

threatened by the learning process. I believe that ESL acquisition was improved because the conditions which were necessary to bring about "a new learning self"(Curran) were developed through the mentor's strategies. Curran's six elements of **SAARRD (security, attention-aggression, reflection-retention, and discrimination)** illustrate the "protégés' new learning self" as a means to ESL acquisition.

The protégés' personal issues were a barrier to their learning process because they felt overwhelmed by their families' situations. They did not know how to handle the Hostos bureaucracy. They did not understand their academic deficiencies. They felt insecure and frightened.

I observed an attitude of total trust and confidence when the protégés were relating to their mentor. I also observed non-judgmental attitude toward the protégés whenever the mentor met with them. The mentor extended her support to allow protégés to call her at home, and each protégé felt comfortable doing this when she needed advice. It could be said that an atmosphere of "**security**" permeated the protégé-mentor relationship.

"**Attention**" stands for the engagement processes undergone by mentor-protégés throughout their meetings. The protégés gave themselves over to the learning process, becoming fully and willingly engaged in it.

"**Aggresion**" refers to the process of becoming assertive in their learning needs. For example, Otilia wanted to know why she was not improving in her writing skills. Once the mentor called her attention to certain areas of weakness, however, Otilia became more willing to tackle new writing assignments and ask for help in the writing center.

The "R's" of SAARRD are the concept of **retention-reflection**. Curran describes **retention** as "a *"self-izing" or "psychizing" process*". Thus retention is "the final process

of acquiring or absorbing into the self what is studied in such a way that it can be retrieved and used with ease and naturalness long after it was “learned” (Rardin, Tranel, Tirone, Green, 1988:114). For example, Otilia was eventually able to distinguish the difference between a sentence fragment and a run-on sentence. She was also more aware of subject verb agreement and the differences between active and passive voice usage.

According to Curran, there are two types of reflection – **“text reflection”** and **“experience reflection”**. Once the mentor had explained the difference between sentence fragments and run on sentences, Otilia was able to understand the aspect of her writing which needed improvement. This is what **“text reflection”** is about, the recognition and understanding of a “new English self (NES)” (Curran 1978: 129) who “steadily grows to finally become as confident an adult in English as in his or her native language.”

**Experience-reflection** refers to time taken to focus on oneself, to reflect on one’s reactions and feelings during the learning process. Curran (1978:129) explains it this way:

the learner often needs time to take counsel with himself around his conflicts, anger, anxiety and general emotional states brought about by the learning experience. We have found it extremely valuable if the teacher – or another person who can speak the native language of the learner – is able to allow the learner to clarify his anger, discouragement – or alternatively, feelings of encouragement and hope – even if that exchange is only two or three minutes long.

This exchange, however, is best carried out if the teacher has acquired some skill in understanding both affective and cognitive communication. This kind of communication can bring forward remarkable gains in self-awareness and can free the learner to go on unimpeded by a certain emotion, conflict or self-accusation.

Francisca and Otilia spoke in Spanish when they shared with the mentor moments of pain in their lives. The mentor acknowledged their feelings by using

Spanish as well. Reverting to their mother tongue allowed Francisca and Otilia time to reflect on their experience through their discussions with their mentor.

**Discrimination** is the last letter in the acronym SAARRD. Curran (1978: 129) proposes that

one of the most common reasons why learners do not discriminate in a language, and therefore continue all their lives to make the same mistakes, is that they were never totally secure and so never completely attentive. Consequently, they never had the chance to reflect on what the exact sound, spelling or grammatical construction was.

Otilia's discomposure about not knowing that which was wrong with her writing and her need for specific guidelines to move on in her learning process, illustrates how this "discriminatory" stage needed to take place. The mentor's guidance in the writing process helped Otilia to overcome one more barrier in her learning process.

### Conclusion

The mentoring program at Hostos Community College not only adds a new dimension to its college life, but also provides a special support which is directly or indirectly conducive to the retention and success of many of its students. The Coordinator of Academic Affairs told me that the majority of students who were involved in the mentoring program were able to graduate within two years of having participated in the program.

The relationship between a mentor and her protégés as evidenced in examples given throughout this paper, is a strong, reliable, and healthy one. Through effective and sincere communication, the mentor and the protégé discuss issues relevant to the student's own life. These issues are motivating and meaningful to her because she engages herself in discussing



problems which affect her family, her future career, and her prospective jobs. The language used during these sessions is natural, not as stilted as that utilized in an ESL classroom.

Through the mentor's empathetic guidance and non-judgmental advice the student is empowered by clarifying her thoughts and ultimate goals, and she is encouraged to take responsibility for her own learning. I see this relationship as a tool which helps language learners make the transition from dependent learner to independent learner. The mentor helps her protégé to develop critical thinking skills which in turn help the protégé to develop language skills. It is expected that eventually the protégé will feel confident enough to tackle her responsibilities on her own.

From this case study I learned that a mentoring program can be a wonderful tool for strengthening relationships between instructors and students on any instructional level. It creates an environment in which the target language is used in the most meaningful contexts of all: those chosen by the student.

Although I had no formal measure of the protégés progress in English, I observed that they were more relaxed in their approach to language learning. They became less frustrated and more assertive in wanting to know what they could do to solve the issues at hand.

In the following chapter I will describe how I used the outcome of this study to implement a mentor program in a new teaching context.

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### CHAPTER 3

#### APPLICATION: ADVISORY GROUP AT I.S. 184

I currently teach ESL through Social Studies content to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at IS 184 in the South Bronx. When I began this new position I wanted to offer my students some of the same advantages I had observed in the Mentor Program at Hostos. I approached my principal with this idea. He suggested the formation of an advisor/advisee program, which I implemented during the 1998/99 school year.

Rafael Cordero y Molina School, I.S. 184 is located at 778 Forest Avenue in the South Bronx. The school is a modern building which houses 798 students. The ethnic census report for IS 184 for all active students through May 27, 1999 is as follows:

American Indian/Alaskan	0.12
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.12
Hispanic	80.70
Black	18.79
White	0.00
Male	53.13
Female	46.86

Given this ethnic and linguistic mix, it was clear that many of these students would face significant academic challenges. It was my hope that they would derive the same

advantages that Francisca and Otilia had by working with their mentor at Hostos. In addition to their language issues, students at IS. 184 face all the challenges of early adolescence.

Middle level education as a separate category is relatively new in popularity and importance. Until recently, education for students between the ages of 10 and 14 was either considered upper elementary or intermediate education in a primarily self-contained classroom setting or secondary education in a departmentalized setting. No thought was given to the unique needs of this group as a separate entity. Recently, educators have finally acknowledged that pre-adolescents in this age succeed better in a program tailored to their needs rather than by trying to mold them into the long standing educational divisions which have catered to the needs of other groups. This new philosophy is therefore targeted specifically to these students considered to be "in the middle".

Children at this time of their lives are faced with a myriad of external and internal changes involved with their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. While the physical changes are readily apparent, the others aren't quite so obvious. A pre-adolescent at this time is searching for autonomy, while needing the safety of the familiar authoritative figures. He/she is testing different value structures, while willing to bow out when the going gets rough. The youngster is being influenced more by peers than family; at times he/she is being pressured into difficult decision-making positions.

If one were to summarize the literature on middle level education in the fewest possible words, it would be that the education is "child-centered" rather than "subject-centered". In keeping with this over-all philosophy of the child being the reason for the program, an advisory program is a natural development. Research has shown that pre-adolescents will thrive on the understanding attention of an adult for even just a few minutes

a day to reassure them that they are worthwhile, to listen to their problems, and to point them in the direction of becoming responsible members of their community and society in general. An advisory/advisee program presents the opportunity to provide this for all students in a non-academic or co-curricular setting with an adult who will be a steady and consistent influence throughout their middle school years. The middle school is the bridge between the elementary and secondary educational program. The Advisory is the link between the close relationship which is fostered in the self-contained classroom of the elementary and the multi-faceted secondary high school program. Students meet in small groups. These groups are self-contained in the sense that confidentiality is a given. The groups can inquire, discuss and reflect upon any themes, subjects, feelings, etc., as they see fit.

Middle school philosophy recognizes that students learn in many different ways. They are acting, feeling, and thinking simultaneously. The content in many curricula for these students concentrates primarily on the cognitive area, resulting in insufficient attention being given to the affective needs of these pre-adolescents. An advisory program is not meant to de-emphasize the importance of the cognitive skills, but rather to emphasize the importance that affective educational development plays in the student's overall development and in the future success of the student. A strong middle level advisory program is one very effective way to help students develop positive behaviors, increase self-awareness, enhance self-concept, increase social skills, and understand emotions.

The advisory program at I.S. 184 was developed with an awareness of the special circumstances which surround adolescence. The administration and advisors established the program as follows. First in assigning students to an advisory, the following information was

considered: the needs and interests of individual students, sex distribution, community origin, friendships, school needs, numerical balance, and, where appropriate, parental requests.

Advisory groups ranged from six to thirteen students per group who met daily (or weekly) with an advisor (teacher, staff member), in a positive, non-threatening and non-graded environment. It was essentially a comprehensive relationship between the advisor and the advisees for the purpose of communication and direction. Advisory provided each student with at least one staff member who had a thorough knowledge of that student's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and personal growth. Advisory enabled students to have an adult advocate in the school, a person who could champion the advisee's cause in student-teacher, student-administrator, and student-student interactions.

The participation in the advisory program at I.S. 184 had many positive outcomes. It enabled students to make new friends in a new social setting, assess their own personal and academic strengths and weaknesses and make decisions in a logical, rational way. Additionally it gave them opportunities to work cooperatively with others, develop a workable value process, and understand courtesy, manners, and fair play. They also could focus on effective study skills and effective communication, and they even began to build a philosophy of life with goals, attitudes, and efforts. They even seemed to develop self-understanding, self acceptance, and self discipline, strengthen their ability to relate and communicate with adults, and develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for behavior and decisions.

The goal of advisor-advisee relationships was to create a positive working relationship that provided the student with both a person and a structure to help resolve school concerns. This was achieved primarily through the individual advisory conference.

These conferences allowed the advisor to keep track of the school activities in which the advisee was participating. Through conferences, the advisor also gained a better understanding of how the student viewed her/his progress. In this way, the advisor gained a better understanding of the student both inside and outside the classroom. This close relationship could not help but ensure the success of each student. Advisees gained a more positive self-image of themselves and also developed a more positive feeling about school and education in general.

The advisor could consult the student's guidance file to get an idea of past progress in academics and social development. However, it was important to have the student feel that each year had new and current challenges and past successes or failures should not determine any future development.

The goal of advisor-parent contacts was effective communication regarding the growth and progress of the child. The advisor served as the main resource in the school for information on each advisee. Advisors were urged to make introductory contact with parents of advisees, either by telephone or in person, during the first month of school. During the fall parent open house, time was set aside for advisors and their advisees' parents to meet.

During the year, whenever an advisor planned to contact a parent, it was important to inform the advisee of the reason for the contact. Parents had to be made aware that their concerns about their child and the Middle School program should be first addressed to the advisor before other staff were involved. Advisors had to keep in mind that the parent was an important resource in working with the child. Parents could provide useful information or background that was helpful to the advisor in understanding a particular situation. Parents and educators had to work together to encourage maximum growth in each child.

Advisors were encouraged to make positive contacts with parents throughout the year, (i.e. informing them via telephone or letter of positive experiences their child had had, sharing with them successes and honors the child had earned.) This is much more important than one realizes, especially if the parents are often contacted only when their child's performance is less than satisfactory. Sharing in successes revitalizes the energy necessary to ensure future progress.

Additionally the advisors were required to contact home if any advisee had been absent for three days in a row. A simple "we miss you" can be important to a middle level child who is not feeling well and improves self-esteem. In addition, a reminder that work can be gathered and sent to the office to be picked up will make the advisee's return to school less traumatic. Students often worry that they will not be able to make up work missed due to an extended illness. Encouragement is often valuable to parents as well as students.

### **Outcome of Personal Advisory Group**

From the case study of the Mentoring Program at Hostos Community College I learned how Curran's six elements of SAARD are crucial in the language learning process. When I started my advisory group at I.S. 184, one of my concerns was how to implement the six elements of SAARRD in my relationship with my students so that language acquisition could be enhanced.

There were many similarities between the protégés from my case study and my own students' parents' background could be said to be very similar to Francisca and Otilia's. The majority of my students' parents did not speak English. They either had jobs in which they were paid off the books or sold homemade arts and crafts to earn money. Most of them were



illegal aliens. Therefore their children, my students, had to take the "adult" role to help their parents to function in this English speaking community. The students then felt insecure and frightened because of this new role.

I perceived my students could be grouped into two "English language learning process" categories: the reticent and the eager. The reticent students did not want to learn English, because they resented being in this country. They dreamed of going back to their native countries. The eager students wanted to learn English to the extent of not wanting to speak Spanish at all. They wanted to belong to this society. They did not want to be identified with their parents' culture. Both groups of students felt disempowered. They both needed special support, like Francisca and Otilia. They needed to be listened to in a nonjudgmental way. I could relate to both groups because of my own upbringing. I did not want to learn Spanish when I grew up, because it was the language of oppression. I was eager to learn English, because it meant freedom. I felt the advisory could be a tool in my quest to become a better English teacher and a support to my students.

I had two 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes of 30 students each. I met one class for 12 periods and the other class for 13 periods a week. I was responsible of teaching Communication Arts and Social Studies. One of my classes was considered transitional, which means they had been in a bilingual setting but were ready to be integrated into a monolingual setting. My other class was considered bilingual. I taught Social Studies in English to both groups.

Six students from each class were selected to form my advisory group. The selection criteria were to combine low achievers and high achievers, students with behavior problems and students with leadership qualities, so that they could learn how to interact and subsequently improve academic performance. The low achievers were reticent to learn

English. The high achievers were eager to learn English. Both groups were fluent in Spanish.

At the beginning I compiled a detailed profile of important information about each of my advisory students. I already knew six of them because they had been my students during the previous year.

We met three times a week during my free time. The administration allowed the students to miss a Spanish class, a technology class and a gym class so that they could meet with me.

I planned a lot of hands-on and interactive activities. I made sure that the lessons and projects enhanced my advisees' self-esteem and sense of self-worth. I gave my advisees ownership in the program through opportunities for decision-making and activity selection. They created their own name and logo. They called themselves "The Dreamers."

I felt frustrated sometimes when I could not solve my advisee's problems. I learned to be more tolerant and a better listener. I tried to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude toward my advisees. I had learned from my observations at Hostos that the protégés needed to feel "secure", the first element of SAARD, in order to establish a trusting relationship with the mentor. I wanted to provide my advisees with an atmosphere of "security" so that learning could be enhanced. I shared my personal struggles with the acquisition of a second language; my issues with Immigration and the process of becoming a "legal resident alien" and my parents' divorce. We shared laughter and tears.

Last year our 8<sup>th</sup> grade culminating activity was the production of "Romeo & Juliet" produced and performed by all 60 of my students. Throughout the year the students complained that they did not have activities where they could interact with other classes and

have fun. The students in my advisory group suggested reading and performing "Romeo & Juliet".

For the last two months of school, the advisory group became the mechanism by which such a production came to life. My 12 advisees became the liaison between the two classes, the administration, the custodians, and the classes were involved in helping to create the props for the setting of the 5 different acts.

A different group of students was in charge of each act so that the amount of lines to be memorized could be better handled. Therefore there were 5 students performing Juliet, 5 performing Romeo and so on and so forth.

After school and Saturday rehearsals were scheduled. The process became a learning experience for me. The students were my teachers. I learned that students take charge of their own learning if given the opportunity. I tailored my last two months of classes to the analysis and production of the play. The reticent language learners changed their attitude towards English once they became involved in the play. This is the second element of SAARD, "attention". The students became engaged with language learning throughout the play. They became "assertive" in their learning needs, third element of SAARD – "aggression". The reticent students wanted to know how to pronounce the words accurately and they requested their "eager" classmates' help. Both groups depended on me for language explanations. Curran's retention-reflection and discrimination elements were evident throughout the process of learning and performing the play. The students "owned" the language. The characters from the play were the vehicles to overcome the language barriers. They felt empowered. The students did a superb job when they performed the play in the school auditorium in front of several classes.

### Conclusion

I always looked for avenues to become a better teacher. I observed the Mentoring Program at Hostos with the expectation of finding some answers. I learned how the program worked and the strategies the mentor utilized in helping her protégés. I learned how Curran's six elements of SAARD could be applied to the language learning process of the protégés. Furthermore such elements helped me to tailor my advisory group at IS. 184. I was looking for a way to help my students break the fears they had towards language acquisition. I wanted to empower them so that they could take charge of their own learning. By listening to their concerns and being nonjudgmental I was able to facilitate their learning through the production of "Romeo & Juliet."

I learned that a relationship of trust and understanding are the key elements for a successful relationship, be it between a mentor and protégé or between advisors and advisees and that learning will take place.

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