



Bay Area Teacher Development Collaborative

{the collaborative}

Tanya: A Case Study

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Foreword

Tanya began unraveling the first week of January. It started with a phone call from her mother on January 7th. As I look back on that phone call it was a turning point, the moment when Tanya finally sent out a cry for help and the adults in her world would spring into action. This is my version of the events, told from my perspective as Tanya's advisor. It starts last August at the beginning of the new school year and the story continues even now. There is no happy ending or even resolution, at least not yet. But it is a story worth telling, maybe just out of my own need to understand what happened, maybe to relieve my frustration at feeling so helpless, and maybe to understand a little of how Tanya must feel living this story.

As I write this now it is the end of May. The girls in my advisory are counting down the days until June 12th, the last day of school and their last day of 6th grade. I've learned a lot about being an advisor this year, particularly about bringing a new student from a significantly diverse family and community into the homogenous community of our school. Hindsight, they say, is 20 – 20. And more than once as I've looked back on this year, I've heard myself say, "If I had it to do over again..." So included in this story you will find my analysis of the events of the year based on my "hindsight." You will see my analysis and my suggestions written in bold font. These suggestions are things I would do "If I had it to do over again..." and may provide some help or insight to other middle school advisors as you welcome new students into your school community.

Introduction

As August rolls around each summer I can feel the "Back to School" ritual set in motion. Binders, notebooks and backpacks replace the lawn chairs in the "seasonal" section of the local Walgreen's. It's time to wrap up the projects at home, enjoy the last of my summer vacation and begin to fantasize about that new school year.

I am a technology teacher at a K – 8 girls' school in San Francisco. I am also a 6th grade advisor to 10 or 12 girls each school year. I have been a 6th grade advisor for four years now. The advisor is the liaison between home and school. My advisees check-in with me each morning and check out with me each afternoon, and we have one Advisory period during the week. The teachers contact me when they have questions or concerns about one of my advisees; the parents contact me when they have concerns about their child at school. I am the touchstone for my girls, the mother hen to my chicks, and the mother duck to my ducklings. Advisory is as much parenting and counseling as it is helping and organizing, and it is probably more intuitive than anything else I do on campus.

This year we would have two new members in the 6th grade class. As a 6th grade advisor, this was important information – adding new students to a group of 42 girls, most of whom have been together since kindergarten, was significant news. Both of the new girls came to us from an organization in the City that screens 5th graders from some of the inner-city public schools in S.F. and helps them find placement in the private schools. Lynne, Head of Upper School, called me early in August to let me know that one of the new girls, Tanya, was being placed in my advisory.

At our school the transition from Lower School to Upper School takes place between 4th and 5th grades. In 6th grade, the girls are mixed into four different advisories and two different sections, with each girl's schedule reflective of her specific foreign language class, math section, etc. Each day is a different schedule, with a different order of classes, and sometimes even a different location for some classes. For most of the girls, transitioning to 6th grade takes about 2 – 4 weeks; for others, it can take most of that first trimester. Maneuvering this schedule and being organized to meet the demands of this scheduling is the primary focus of Advisory during the first trimester of 6th grade.

Advisory this year would entail welcoming two new students to the 6th grade, one new student, Tanya, in my advisory. I met Tanya and her mom the day before school started, when the new students are invited to visit. I showed them the Technology Lab, which is my classroom and the spot where my Advisory meets. Tanya seemed somewhat shy and reserved – no surprise there. This school was clear across town from her home, and most of the faces she was seeing were white; she's African American. Our school has very few African American students, so Tanya would not see many black faces on campus. In fact Lorena is the only other African American girl in the sixth grade; Lorena and Tanya would both be in my advisory this year.

***The school always invites new students to visit the school the day before school actually begins, so they can meet their teachers and know where to go the morning they arrive. As a 6th grade advisor I receive a letter in August with the names of my advisees. One thought I have now is to invite some of the other girls in my new advisory to come to school on the day of the tour and act as tour guides and 'buddies' for the new girls. I think having teams of girls acting as 'buddies' would be more welcoming for the new girls. Hopefully their little conversations would reveal some of the "hidden culture" to the new girls, too. I would have their schedules already written down so the girls could help the new students find their way around the campus, actually walking through their schedules, helping them find their classes, the gym, the bathrooms and meet the teachers in their classrooms. This would also provide some familiar faces for the new students that first day of school.*

Finally it is the first day of school; the girls arrive, quietly at first. They know where to find me and come in the door wearing their clean, white middies, new skirts and scuff-free shoes, the rested and relaxed look of summer mingling with the anticipation of this new beginning. Backpacks are also new, filled with binders, supplies and notebooks. The girls are eager and bright, zealous students, happy to be back at school with their friends, eager to meet new teachers. My immediate focus is to welcome my girls, establish a sense of the "group," an advisory identity.

Tanya arrives at the door – the new girl! Everyone knows we have two new girls and now everyone knows one of them is in our advisory. It happens instantly – I can see it happen; the eyes dart around the room, they see the "new girl." She is black. Is that what they see first? And what does this mean? The girls are sizing her up. The quick glance to their friends, back at the new girl... she's wearing a blue cardigan over her mididy. They look back at each other. I can almost hear their thoughts, "No one wears a blue sweater!" and they mean NO ONE, in big capital letters. Already Tanya is being judged, sized-up.

***Another suggestion: disclose the hidden culture of the school! At our school none of the girls in Upper School wear the cardigan sweater that is listed as part of the uniform code; the girls at our school wear the navy blue school sweat-shirt or a navy blue fleece. This little tidbit of information is but one piece of the hidden culture of our school. Each independent school should write a handbook of the "hidden culture" of their school that includes the 'ins' and 'outs' not found in the school's family handbook. It would include the kind of information students usually only learn from their experience at the school.*

We sit in a circle. I tell them what our agenda includes. I want to frame the morning, the day, the week, so they know what to expect. We spend sometime getting to know one another. I talk a little about myself, and we go around in a circle, everyone taking turns, so Tanya can introduce herself, so she can meet everyone else and begin to learn a little about each of us.

Tanya has a beautiful smile – it becomes her trademark – a wide smile and the smoothest, most beautiful skin. Her hair is very neatly braided and styled. Her eyes are huge, looking around, taking in all she sees. She appears shy, holding back, looking uneasy, uncomfortable. I want her to feel comfortable and welcomed.

We spend the first period reviewing the day's schedule, everyone records their own schedule, with room locations and sections for math, language and study skills. The girls are all busy writing and gabbing, catching up on each other's lives.

I explain to Tanya about Study Skills, the class she takes in place of a foreign language. Again there is a rush of unspoken communication throughout the room "The new girl is in Study Skills!" They may as well have shouted it out loud as the judgment fell on the room. Study Skills, to the uninformed, or to a 5th grader or new 6th grader, means the special class, some may even say the class for the slow kids. Tanya and Bonnie, the other new girl from the after school program, have both been assigned to Study Skills because they did not have foreign language during the fifth grade at their old schools. Furthermore, it is hoped that this small class can help them both transition into our school, a place so different from their previous school. I also explain to Tanya, and the rest of the advisory, that Study Skills is taught by my friend, Sandra Miller, who works closely with the girls who have special learning needs and helps them learn how they learn and teaches them to advocate for themselves. I tell them how she guides each of her girls through Upper School; the girls not only improve their study skills they also become more self-aware and accepting of their own learning style. I tell Tanya how lucky she is to be able to work with Ms. Miller, I tell her Ms. Miller is my friend and she is such a great teacher that Tanya will love her class. And I make some general statement aimed at the rest of the "group," saying that throughout the year we'll be talking a lot about the brain, learning, metacognition and that Tanya can share some of what she's learning with all of us.

Time is marching on we still have lots to do. I walk around to be sure everyone understands her own schedule. Tanya is laboring over the papers. Is it nerves? Her printing is neat, but the size of a 3rd grader's! I'm kind of surprised! She is erasing a lot – struggling – she'll never finish! I leap in to help her because we're running out of time.

***Next time I'll have the schedules ready to go!*

I ask for volunteers to help guide Tanya around campus. This is a tough one... everyone is so thrilled to be back at school they want to be with their own friends. These are 6th grade girls. They need to check-in with everyone, size up their friendships, are they still friends? The same friends they were yesterday? last week? before summer? This is the primary work of a 6th grade girl; schoolwork is secondary.

I finally enlist a couple girls to guide Tanya to class. I remind them she'll need help between classes, finding the next classroom. The morning advisory ends in a blur. The girls are packing up, schedules in hand. Tanya is struggling to finish, to pack it up and figure out where she's headed. The last thing I say is to be sure to include Tanya, watch out for her. "Yes, yes, Ms. Schaumburg," everyone nods and agrees. I remind them that they need to check-in with me at the end of the day. "Yes, yes," they understand. "And don't lose Tanya," I say as they head out the door.

Whew... I'm not thrilled about how that went. It felt uneasy, too forced, awkward. Tanya seemed overwhelmed. I wanted someone to reach out to her and be her new best friend; that didn't happen. At 3:15 when the day was over, there was no Tanya. "Where is she?" I asked as the girls begin to arrive back in my room. No one seemed to know. Yes, she had been in class. "I thought she was right behind me." "I saw her in the hall... I think she headed toward the main office..." Great! The first day of school and I've lost the new girl.

*** The buddies or tour guides will continue helping the new students the first day or so. They would work in teams so they can share responsibility and still have fun these first few days of school.*

The First Division Meeting

Wednesdays are faculty meetings at our school and the first division meeting is our first chance to discuss the girls, to see how they are doing with everyone, to share our observations. Everyone was well aware of the two new 6th graders, so naturally they were a focus of some discussion. Bonnie, also from the after school program, was doing remarkably well, adjusting and fitting in, striving to please. When Tanya's name came up, everyone, it seemed, had a story to tell – watching her on the courtyard, between classes, in the halls – Tanya was not mixing in, not mingling with her classmates, always, it seemed, observing from a distance. She is very slow, having trouble being organized, often arriving late to class because she's forgotten something in her locker or because she is slow leaving the previous class. Tanya wears her coat all day; in fact she very often keeps her sweater and her coat on. To a teacher, they all comment on what a delightful girl Tanya is, how they enjoy their private interactions with her. She is winning over the adults with her smile, conversations and sense of humor, but she's not connecting with the other girls. When we talk academics more concerns emerge. Her skill level seems quite low, compared to the rest of the class. Her handwriting is immature, her keyboarding skills non-existent. Yet in conversation, it is obvious Tanya is very bright. The screening and testing by the after school program put her at the top of their 6th graders.

*** Our school has a commitment to expanding the diversity of the school community and we have a Director of Multi-Cultural Programs, Janet, whose job it is to help us work toward this goal. If I had the year to do over, I would have encouraged Janet to meet with Tanya from the very beginning of the school year. In fact, I think it would be very helpful to have Janet come to my Advisory meetings and be a part of Tanya's transition to the school, checking in with her and with me on a regular basis. She could work with all the advisories specifically helping the new students of color assimilate to the new environment. I wish I had been more pro-active drawing Janet into my work with Tanya and my advisory. Maybe we could have determined much earlier how to handle the issue of Tanya wearing her coat all day long.*

The First Trimester

The faculty's feedback was important information for me as Tanya's advisor. This information would focus my work for this first trimester. I had work to do. I had to help Tanya get organized and I had to help her connect with her classmates.

Each year the new 6th graders have a lot to organize: their lockers, their binders, and their homework. They have to learn which teacher requires which notebook for which class and when their homework is due. For many 6th graders this is a challenge; for Tanya it was overwhelming. Tanya seemed completely unable to arrive at class on time with all her materials. Sandra and I began to focus our energies on helping Tanya become more organized. In Advisory I asked all the girls to share their binders and their personal system for organizing their homework, etc. Each girl showed what worked for her – a large binder, individual subject folders, etc. I pulled out extra folders and notebooks to share with the girls and to offer suggestions for organizing their belongings. We also had locker check and helped Tanya get her locker more organized so her books and notebooks would be accessible.

***Each morning I should have helped Tanya list what she needed for her morning classes, and even go with her to her locker to gather what she needed. This is the kind of organizational work that is usually learned in fifth grade, so I am not used to doing this with my sixth graders.*

Tanya didn't sit much. She was always on the move, bundled up in that blue denim jacket with the black faux fur cuffs and trim. She wears this coat all day, every day, and the weather doesn't matter. Even on our hottest days of Indian summer, Tanya wears her coat. When I suggest she remove it, that she'd be more comfortable, she still wears her coat, often covering that blue cardigan. I wonder does she keep that coat on so she's ready to bolt? Ready to escape? This is classic behavior for a new student, or so I've been told, particularly for a student of color, keeping the coat on as a form of protection or defense. Is it cultural in some way?

***Perhaps with Janet's help I could have better understood Tanya's need to wear her coat all day. If I had it to do over again, I would insist that she keep her coat in her locker and wear only a sweater or sweatshirt to class, like the rest of the girls. The coat was insulating her from the environment.*

At lunchtime Tanya would wander by the cafeteria food line, and maybe select something to eat, usually ice cream. She would walk around the yard, and often would sit on the bench with whichever teacher was on yard duty that day. When I was on yard duty, her eyes would light up; she would rush over and sit with me.

"Hey, how 'ya doin'?" I ask as she saunters up. "What's up?"

"Not much," she says.

"What're ya havin' for lunch?" I ask, trying to get her to talk.

"Ice cream."

"Is that all?"

"I'm not hungry."

I probe a little, "Do you have your lunch card? Aren't you hungry? What have you had to eat?" I can feel the parent in me rise. I tell her what I'm eating. Does she want some? Want to sit? I try to get to why she isn't sitting with any of the other girls.

"I'm okay," she insists.

She is always okay and she never wants to connect, at least not with the other students. I worry about this. She says she is happy, but all of us are wondering if she really is happy? How can she get through this year – a new school, no close friends, lots of work, new culture to learn, really working hard on the school work, learning to stay organized... and yet not having any real close alliances, a black girl in an almost all white school.

I've spoken with Janet, our multi-cultural programs coordinator and asked for her advice. What can I do for Tanya to help her feel safe, accepted? Janet assures me I am doing the right thing. Listening to her, helping her learn to maneuver in this new culture, allowing her the space she needs to figure it all out. This is one of those times when intuition guides an advisor. The fact that I have raised three kids in public schools in San Francisco also helps. This independent school culture was new to me at one time, too. On the other hand, I am white. I'm not black; I haven't lived in Tanya's world and can't pretend to know it. So I listen and I reach out and I encourage and support... and I worry that I am not doing enough or doing the right thing or worse, am I doing the wrong thing...

***We have never made home visits, but I wonder if this is something an advisor should do? We ask this student to come into our school, our community and we have no experience with her world, her community. Maybe this is something a school should consider, visiting a new student in their home.*

As Tanya's advisor I check in with her mom and with the people at her after school program. I ask them how they think she is doing? Everyone reports that Tanya is very happy with school. She tells everyone how much she likes her new school and that she is adjusting to the new routines, the complicated schedule and is learning to keep up with the demands of her class work. She receives 90 minutes of tutoring there twice a week after school.

***Visit the after school tutoring program! I meant to do this all year long and never managed to get myself there. I thought all year long that they would be making the effort to connect with me, but I initiated the few conversations we had. Perhaps a visit there would have made me better informed.*

Tanya's mom comes to school for her parent/teacher conference; Sandra and I are there along with three of Tanya's other teachers, the school psychologist and Lynne, Head of the Upper School. The teachers review Tanya's work habits, her weaknesses in some areas, her strengths in others. The mom seems to know her daughter very well. By the end of the hour I feel somewhat relieved – Tanya is a lot like her mom, somewhat of a late bloomer and slow mover. Doing better in math than her other subjects, writing skills are somewhat weak, but she enjoys reading. Mom has assured us she will keep monitoring the homework and we'll keep

her on track at school. The school will provide tutoring for Tanya two of the days she stays on campus after school; her after school program will continue tutoring two other days. Her mom finally acknowledged that when she was in school, she liked to keep her coat on all day. It was a level of comfort for her. We all realize Tanya is a lot like her mom, everyone seems happy. The conference went well and we have a plan.

*** Even though we came up with a plan, we should have been much more specific about our system of “notices” for behavioral infractions. We should have informed Tanya’s mom so she would know what to expect if Tanya was not following through on what was expected of her. I should have called the mom on a more regular basis or established a system for communication, for example a note home every Friday or a daily checklist that the mom would have been looking for. Sandra seemed to have the most contact with the mom because she would see her when she picked up Tanya after tutoring. She promised us she would monitor the homework each night but we could have done a better job communicating between each other.*

Trouble

We returned to school from our winter holidays on Monday, January 6th, 2003. Tanya was absent on Monday but Tuesday when she arrived she seemed fine. In the middle of first period the school’s secretary buzzed my room and said I had a phone call I needed to take; it was Tanya’s mom, Rosemary. She said Tanya didn’t want to come to school, that she broke down in tears and said the other girls had been mean to her. Rosemary calmed her down and told her she had to come to school but that we would figure out what was going on; she called me, she called the school’s secretary, she called the Head of the Upper School, and she called the Admissions Director. Tanya’s meltdown signaled trouble and Rosemary was ready to protect her daughter; she meant business.

When I took the call I listened to what Rosemary had to say. I told her Tanya was in the middle of class but I would definitely follow-up at recess. I would see what I could find out and then call Rosemary back. Finally it was recess, my tech class had just left the room; it was my first chance to go look for Tanya outside in the yard. I searched and searched and finally found her with some girls hanging around the entrance to the gym. I was surprised to find her there, engaged in some kind of interaction or recess play? I didn’t want to interrupt the play because she so seldom “played” with her classmates, but I only had a few minutes and I had to get back to Rosemary.

I caught Tanya’s eye... somehow she always knows when I am around, seeing me when I appear transparent to the rest of the girls. The other girls easily ignore me; Tanya doesn’t. I motioned for her to come over and she gave me that big, broad grin that is her trademark. “Hi,” I said. “Can we talk for a few minutes?” And we started walking toward the courtyard. I put my arm through hers. She looked up at me, with a sideways glance and said, “You’ve been talking to my mother!”

Right away she knew what I wanted to talk to her about; it was what she wanted to talk to me about. So, I say, “Your mother tells me you didn’t want to come to school today. Talk to me about this...”

The conversation centered on an incident in Humanities class weeks ago, before the vacation, when Tanya was supposed to be working on a project with a couple other girls. According to Tanya, Corrin and Danielle exchanged a moment of “eye contact,” a knowing glance and one of them said, “ You should put your binder on the floor.” At which point Corrin took Tanya’s binder and unceremoniously dropped it on the floor. Now that’s the story that I heard. The story her mom heard was a bit more embellished, with a lot more negativity. Mom’s version had elements of pre-meditation, focused aggression and racism. Certainly the mom was worrying about this element of the story and it is a factor that I worry about as well; am I sensitive enough to the ethnic diversity when handling these behaviors. Was this a racially motivated incident? Or a “new kid at school” incident? Or just mean-spirited 6th grade girl behavior?

My initial reaction was to consider the girls involved in the story. Corrin is in Study Skills with Tanya and is a student on the lower end of the class hierarchy; I wasn’t surprised she was involved because she is fre-

quently involved in skirmishes with her classmates. On the other hand, Danielle is a great student, always smiling and helpful; I was shocked that she was involved because it seemed uncharacteristic for her. We talked about the incident, how Tanya saw it and how it felt to her, and then about Tanya's response. Tanya did and said nothing. I told her there was not another 6th grader in the class who would have said and done nothing; most of them would have reacted loudly and quickly – some of them would have told the teacher – but all of them would have done something. I didn't even hear about this incident until weeks after it occurred, and after the vacation. I think the incident provided the opportunity for Tanya to ask for help, to acknowledge that she was struggling.

***Tanya was opening a door that day, a door to her world. She was inviting us in, finally acknowledging that she needed some help. She had been putting on a smiling face for all the adults in her world since that first day of school. Maybe the denial was over and she was finally ready to acknowledge some anger, grief and sadness. Here is a young girl who has moved homes, changed schools, and was living in a very different culture. This was too much to handle. And maybe after a vacation we should not be surprised to see this kind of sadness and homesickness emerge; she would rather be in the comfort of her home, than in this foreign world, meeting our foreign demands.*

What next?

So what followed during January? We all sprung into action, watching more carefully, monitoring Tanya's homework, class work and her social interactions. The after school program assured Tanya's mom that we were all working together and if, for some reason, we decided that our school was not the right school for Tanya, we would find another school that would work for Tanya.

At the same time that this was happening with Tanya, some of the teachers were making plans for the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Tanya was the first student to volunteer to help and the timing couldn't have been better. She attended the planning sessions, rehearsed, remembered to bring props and costumes from home, and participated in a little stage production during assembly. It was a successful experience and provided some positive feedback for Tanya; that little performance served to balance some of her difficulties at school, at least for a time. But all of us were paying serious attention.

During the "Admissions" season, when we have visitors attending the Upper School, my advisory brainstormed ways that they you can make a visitor feel welcomed. I used this as an opportunity to get Tanya to talk about how hard it is to feel a part of a new school and make new friends when everyone has been together for so long. Joan suggested Tanya join an after school sports team. She said sometimes when you hang out with other girls, and work together for a team, you begin to become friends "...cause you're working for the same thing."

Another girl, who incidentally had been new to the school the year before, encouraged Tanya to sit with her classmates at lunchtime out on the yard, "Just hang out with the group and act as if you belong, and pretty soon you'll feel like you do." I thought this advice was brilliant – suggesting that Tanya 'try on' a new behavior to see if it 'fit,'

Meanwhile, the other advisors and teachers were keeping an eye on things with Tanya and checking in with me frequently. The most presenting behavior was Tanya's lack of attention in class. She would practically fall asleep at times. She often stretched her arm out along the table and rested her head on her arm. When called on it, she would say, with a smile, "I'm tired." And indeed, she always seemed listless and lethargic. In Science class she would just not perform. She would stretch out along the table, and at times refuse to get busy working. Her homework would not be turned in on time. She would lose it or procrastinate working on it. If a video were being shown, she would have to stand up so as not to fall asleep.

***The most important thing I have learned through this past year: hold Tanya accountable, just as every other student is held accountable. The teachers were reluctant to give her "notices" for being late to class, for being unprepared, for*

not turning in her assignments. By not disciplining Tanya like everyone else, it was as if we were telling her we didn't think she could do the work, that we were adjusting our standards for her. I see now that we should have pushed this earlier in the year.

I was out of school the last week of January because of knee surgery. Several teachers told me Tanya had a tough week. She was distracted, not prepared, wouldn't even work during tutoring with Sandra. Out of the blue one day she says, "I need to go swimming." Sandra waited for Tanya to get started working... "I'm having allergies..." Another day Tanya came in and told Sandra, "No more packets!" (She was referring to her science homework.) Sandra continued her own work, but encouraged Tanya to get out her homework and get started. Tanya moaned and complained. She put her backpack on, and then she took it off. She said, "Too much change." Sandra quizzed her, "What do you mean, too much change? She went on to say there were "...too many changes in her life – her voice changed, her bedroom changed, her brother was back..." She put her backpack back on and she erased her fingernails. By now it was 4:10. "I don't want to go to school." She put her head down and said, "I don't like this." Sandra finally told her to go. If she didn't want to be there, and wasn't working it was a waste of both of their times. By expressing her own frustration and telling Tanya she could just give up and go, Sandra, I think, sort of forced Tanya to make a choice, at least for that moment, that day. She finally got to work and finished what she had to do.

It was only later that this piece about the changes in her life made more sense to me. I knew she had changed schools. What I didn't know was that she had also changed homes. Tanya had lived most of her life with her grandmother who was diagnosed with dementia when Tanya was in the fourth grade. It was then, just 2 years earlier when Tanya had started living with her mother, stepfather and a little brother. When I asked more about the "changes" in her life she told me about changing bedrooms. Now that Grandma was moved to an assisted care facility Tanya could have her own room, painted and decorated the way she wanted. And the most recent change was that a 16 year-old stepbrother had recently moved into the home, as well.

It was about this time that Sandra finally suggested testing for attentional issues. Clearly we all needed more information and we were all trying every trick in the book. Lynne, our Head of Upper School, finally agreed to pursue testing through the Children's Center at Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute, the school would pay the cost of the testing. We knew from experience this would be a lengthy process, but we were struggling for answers and needed help.

Meanwhile, in Humanities Tanya was consistently not prepared. Even when the teacher stood outside the door of class and told the girls exactly what they needed to bring, Tanya would be missing something. More often than not, Tanya would get up 10 minutes into class and walk to the door to retrieve something from her locker. When questioned, Tanya would say she forgot... a book, or a notebook, or a journal.

I encouraged all the teachers to hold Tanya to the same standard of behavior as the rest of the girls. If the girls were expected to be in the classroom before the bell, then Tanya should be expected to be there as well. Some of the teachers were reluctant to discipline Tanya with the school "notice" form, our disciplinary system – two notices equals a call home, three notices equals a call home and a detention. The teachers were reluctant to hand out notices to Tanya because so much of her behavior seemed "noticeable" and beyond her control. It was hard to draw a line, in part because Tanya is so likable that we were all sympathetic to her. They were afraid they would be handing out a dozen notices a week!

***Give "notices:" hold Tanya accountable.*

Frustration reigned! Teachers were completely frustrated and didn't know what do. How much are we helping this girl? Is this the right school? I was frustrated and could only imagine how frustrated Tanya must feel.

It was time for another talk with Tanya. “What do you think is going on? I heard about the problem in science class and staying in at recess...So many people are worried about you being happy, the teachers check in with me, with Ms. Miller, ...” finally I say, “so I guess I’m kind of wondering if you want to like it here?” She looked with a little turn of her head, as if to say, did I hear her right? And she said, “Uh, huh,” and nodded her head.

“Well I guess I want to say, do you like it here... or maybe I should say, what do you like here?” I felt completely inadequate trying to ask the questions because so much had been said, written, thought and talked about. So I kind of regrouped and finally said, “I know this is completely different from your last school. What were you expecting?”

This opened her up a lot. “I always wanted to go to an all girls school, even when I was little. My grandmother told me she went to an all girls’ school. The boys’ school was across the street.” Ah, following in the footsteps of her much beloved grandmother!

“So what did you think it would be like? How did you imagine it? How did you picture it?” I ask.

“I thought it would be in my neighborhood, with most of the people that I know.”

“Well, this is pretty far away from your neighborhood...”

“Uh, huh,”

“And the people here aren’t really like the people in your neighborhood, either, huh?”

She looked at me. “Did you mean that the population of the girls are mostly white? Well where I went to school before it was mostly African-American and Samoan, a lot of Samoans.

My two best friends are mixed. One of them is part Filipino and – I don’t know what else- that’s Trisha, she goes to Luther Burbank. And my other best friend is 12 different things... I don’t even know what all of them are...she’s my friend from my after school program. She goes to Presidio Hill.”

We got interrupted.... the continuing frustration of being an advisor; there is never enough time!

Eventually Tanya and I talked again about her friendships and she said she has a friend at the after school program and her best friend lives in her neighborhood, around the corner. I suspect living with a grandmother for many years limited the amount of peer interaction she had. Her social skills with her peers are limited; she really doesn’t know how to interact with her peers.

***As we got to know Tanya better it was clear she would have fit better in our fifth grade class, not the sixth grade. All the issues we were dealing with were so much more common amongst the fifth graders. The after school program finds students from fifth grade classes and works with them to place them into the sixth grade in the independent schools. The adjustment from the public schools in San Francisco to the independent school community is HUGE. I think many of these students would find the transition easier if they entered in fifth grade.*

Nutrition became an on-going concern, as well. Sue, the science teacher, took an ice cream away from Tanya one day and put it in the freezer until she ate something with some protein. The school psychologist saw her eating chips one day at lunch and encouraged her to find something a little healthier to eat. All these reports filtered back to me. Tanya arrived in advisory one morning and I greeted her with, “Hey there, girl! How are you?”

“I feel nauseous.”

“Really? What’s the matter? Did you have any breakfast?” my motherly self inquires.

“I didn’t have time for anything,” was the reply.

Another one of my advisees pops up with, “I have a Luna Bar in my pocket; want that?”

Tanya acts like she doesn’t even hear her so I ask, “Did you hear what Donna said?”

“Huh?” she answers. And I repeat Donna’s generous offer. Tanya smiles and accepts Donna’s Luna Bar. I am silently cheering – yippee! A connection!

Again I addressed the importance of proper nutrition during some of our advisory conversations. We went around the circle one morning and I asked everyone what she had for breakfast. Tanya had two snicker-

cookies and went on to explain that they were cookies formed around little mini-sized snickers bars! Great treat, not much of a breakfast. I took to keeping cartons of granola bars in my classroom.

***Suggestion to other advisors: keep protein bars and bottles of water available for all your students!*

Another morning Tanya waited until everyone else had gone off to first period and said, "Mrs. Clayton (the school's secretary) told me if I want to go to her office at lunch for a nap I can." Right away she corrects herself, "Well, after I eat my lunch..."

"Well, that's really not okay with me. I think at lunch you need to eat a healthy lunch and then you need to hang out outside and play with your friends." She stares at me; I know she doesn't like this. I think she prefers being with adults rather than with the rest of the girls. They aren't mean to her; they just don't reach out much anymore. On the other hand I suspect Mrs. Clayton, who is African-American, is a grandmother figure to Tanya and she is longing for this connection. Again I think about the loss in Tanya's life, the grandmother's dementia meant the loss of the grandmother she knew, moving meant the loss of the home she knew, and changing schools again, meant another loss. There has been a lot of loss in this girl's life and I wonder how much anyone has helped her grieve this loss. Finally I say, "You are going to be late!" She rolls her stool over to the table, grabs her binder and rolls toward the door; she only has two minutes now to get to class. She stops at the scotch tape dispenser grabs a piece of scotch tape to play with and off she goes.

***Tanya loved her interactions with the adults. She sought out adult company during recess, lunch, before and after school and the adults were all reaching out to her because she seemed so alone. I think to a great degree this is because she grew up with her grandmother and felt more comfortable interacting with the adults in her world rather than her classmates. Finally I determined that this adult interaction was preventing Tanya from interacting with her classmates and I asked the adults on campus to encourage Tanya to go outside and to be with her classmates; this was a constant effort all year long.*

In the past our Director of Multi-Cultural Programs has held affinity groups for the students of color. This year the first mention of an African-American affinity group was in mid-April. I was sitting at one of the lunch tables with some of my advisees when two African-American girls from the 7th grade approached Tanya and Lorena and invited them to attend their affinity meeting later in the week. It was a heartfelt gesture; I could tell the 7th graders were trying to drum up participation. So Thursday I reminded Tanya about the lunchtime meeting. She said she had science work to make it up at lunchtime with the science teacher. I went to the science teacher to get a reprieve from the lunchtime work appointment, then to Sandra to be sure she could help Tanya finish the science during after school tutoring that day, then to Tanya to let her know what I had worked out, and then to Janet to let her know that Tanya would be at the affinity group. Whew! What a lot of effort to get one girl to a "voluntary" meeting. But so it goes... That afternoon I asked Tanya about the meeting and she seemed quite pleased with it. She said they were supposed to bring something important to them from their culture, their home, and share it with the group. She had forgotten to bring anything, but she had a necklace her dad gave her that she wears all the time, so she shared that. The group seemed important; she liked it and connected to the other girls. Unfortunately, that was the only affinity meeting held all year.

***Affinity groups have a place! Students of color need affirmation from each other and from adults of color. They need to see themselves reflected somewhere in the community.*

Springtime

It is April 30th and we just yesterday received Tanya's test results from Langley Porter. Now we have more information. The testing has confirmed that Tanya does not have a learning disability and she does indeed have attentional issues. The report concludes with: Thus, a diagnosis of ADHD, Inattentive subtype is indicated, formerly known as "ADD without hyperactivity." The report offers several recommendations "to remediate weaknesses and enhance strengths..." As teachers we have been making all the accommodations they are recommending; the disconcerting factor is that it has not been enough. The one recommendation

left untried is for drug intervention. The psychiatrists and psychologists who did the testing suggest trying a course of medication, which may help Tanya stay focused and not lose her attention. With only 5 weeks left of school, I am one of the people on campus who would like to give this a try. If drug intervention could help Tanya function in school and if she could feel that difference, then we could give her more hope. We could end this school year on a positive note, knowing that we have a tool to help her with 7th grade. Finally we were able to meet with Rosemary and all the teachers to review the results of Tanya's testing. It was an interesting meeting – the humanities teacher mentioned that Tanya had scored very well on her latest vocabulary test, plus she had been arriving more prepared since receiving a notice; the math teacher reported the same. We talked about the ever-present jacket. Rosemary's response was that she wanted her daughter held to the same standards as everyone else – if she is late – give her a notice; if she is out of uniform – give her a notice.

***Again, hold her accountable, early on!*

I have to admit that I was disappointed that Rosemary had not read the information on attentional issues that Sandra shared with all of us prior to the meeting. I understand she is a busy woman with children, a job, school, etc. But we are all busy, too, and working so hard with her daughter. The information was so short, easy to read, informative and understandable. Why hadn't she read this article? Especially before facing a conference with all her daughter's teachers and the Head of Upper School, I thought she would be more prepared. Is this a case of my expectations not being in synch with her culture? When I spoke with Lynne I was so frustrated by a couple things – Why hadn't Rosemary been prepared for the meeting? Where was Janet, our Director of Multi-Cultural Programs? And why hadn't she let us know she couldn't be at the meeting? And meanwhile... where is the after school program?

***The after school program told us early in the school year that they would be in close contact with us throughout the year, monitoring their students to be sure they were doing well and succeeding. I only heard from them one time all year long; usually I was the one to contact them. I was very disappointed by their lack of involvement throughout the year.*

***I wish Janet had been more involved with me throughout the year, as well.*

Everyone agreed Tanya needed to be held to the same standards and we agreed we would make her remove her coat. Her mom sort of misunderstood our concerns about the coat. She thought it was an issue of being out of uniform; I explained she uses the coat as a cover and defense.

We also asked Rosemary to have Tanya's thyroid checked, in case there was a medical reason for her sluggishness, for being cold, for not eating well. And again we addressed the issue of medication. She agreed she would look into it. I spoke to her as a mother – saying I would never suggest trying this if we hadn't exhausted every other avenue. Furthermore, we would know if it was helping Tanya stay focused pretty quickly; if it did work, it would provide some hope for Tanya, indeed for all of us, for seventh grade. Again, we would wait and see what happened.

We didn't have to wait long. The next week we had a "Families" event when the 8th graders dance the maypole and the rest of the school meets in their "family" group, eating lunch and watching the 8th graders dance. We have a short time for recess and then back to classes.

During the recess time, Tanya arrived in my room and sat at a computer working with Kid Pix. I was busy doing something else and when I got up to go to the printer, I noticed no one was on the yard, yet Tanya still sat on the stool. I said, glancing at the clock, "Oh, my gosh! You're late – lunch recess is over and you're late. Hurry off to class."

She returned in about 3 minutes asking me for a note excusing her for being late. "I can't give you a note; you were just here hanging around and drawing on the computer."

She got all teary eyed and said, “But I’ll get a notice, and it will be my third so I’ll get a detention.” I put my arm around her shoulders and said, “Yes, you probably will get a notice, but that is not the end of the world.”

She kept crying, “My mom will be mad.”

I told her I would call her mom and explain, and that I would walk her back to class. I practically had to pull her toward the door, gave her some Kleenex and we walked to Humanities. As we walked across the yard I said, “This is another reason why I want you to hang on the yard with your classmates – you would have known you needed to be somewhere. I know we had a schedule change... but everyone else managed to get to class... this is what you need to learn.”

When I gave Tanya the notice at the end of the day, she signed it and walked out to go to Sandra for tutoring. I had alerted Sandra earlier in the day, so she would be prepared for the fallout.

Wednesday morning when I got to school I found a little post-it in my snail-mail box at the front office and it said, “Ms. Schaumburg, this is to let you know that I am not speaking to you. Tanya.” The Humanities teacher got a similar note.

I was anxious to see how she would handle greeting me that morning at check-in and with the rest of the group. She wasn’t there... I was surprised when she walked in half way through the advisory check-in with a note from Lynne excusing her tardiness.... Sheesh! Just what I didn’t need to happen; my opportunity to speak with Tanya was foiled! She didn’t speak to me that entire day. She came to the Tech. Lab with her Humanities class and never so much as gave me a glance. She came later in the day to the Tech lab with her science class and again I was ignored. At 3:15 check-out she didn’t even show up. Wow! She was REALLY mad! And the bad news was that missing check-out meant she would get ANOTHER notice!

Thursday morning rolled around and she showed up in advisory. “Hey,” I said, “Can we talk a minute?” I took her into the adjoining room and asked her why she hadn’t made it to check-out Wednesday.

“I had to catch the bus!” (her transportation to the after school program.)

“I know, you always have to catch the bus on Wednesdays, Mondays, too. But you still have to check-out with me or send me a message!”

“I did; I asked Lorena to tell you I was going to the bus.”

“Okay, well Lorena didn’t tell me so I’ll check with her; if she tells me you did send me a message and she just forgot –then you’re off the hook; otherwise, you’ll be getting another notice from me.” (Thankfully Lorena corroborated Tanya’s story and she didn’t have to have another notice.) But before Tanya and I finished our conversation I told her I understood she was mad at me, and she could be mad at me, but she couldn’t ignore me, or be rude or disrespectful. She nodded. My instincts told me to give her lots of space and just see what would happen next.

That Thursday she had detention after school. During that time Lynne told her she needed to deal with me – find a way to talk with me about what happened and why she was still so mad. Also during detention she wrote me a letter accepting responsibility for her actions and promising to be more organized. It seemed rather hollow; I wasn’t satisfied.

Friday the 6th grade had a field trip and were gone ALL day, so I didn’t see Tanya except during morning check-in. Boy, was I ready for the weekend!

Monday morning rolled around; I really didn’t want to get out of bed. May is always such a busy month at schools – cramming every final project, performance and test into one month. My Monday schedule was really busy; the last two periods I would see all the fifth graders and an 8th grade art elective class at the same time. I knew walking up to school that I would have a busy day. When I got to my snail-mail box I found a copy of a notice – Tanya! She got a notice during the after school study hall! After school on Friday – after the field trip! Yikes!!! I’ve never heard of that happening!

So what was the story? Tanya arrived in my room Monday morning for check-in and I asked her to come see me. I asked what happened. She and another girl were being loud during a video and were asked to be quiet once; when they continued another teacher came from the classroom next door and told the after school study hall person to give a notice to whoever was being loud... Tanya and a fifth grader both got notices. Tanya didn't seem at all upset. In fact, she was smiling, and kind of held herself with a little bit of a cocky attitude. Interesting behavior, I thought.

It is the middle of May and today when I looked at Tanya I saw a different girl. First, the jacket is gone; it has been gone since last week. She is wearing a Burke's sweatshirt over her middie, with her uniform skirt over some navy jogging pants – completely in uniform, warm, and looking like everyone else, for the first time all year. And, more to the point, she FELT to me that she had a certain – attitude, a certain cache. Maybe she figured out that notices and detention weren't so bad, maybe her distance from me is a good thing. At least when she is mad at me she isn't in my room hanging out with me. Tanya brings her home-work log for me to review at the end of the day so Sandra, the mom and I all are coordinated on what assignments are due. The final project for Humanities was accomplished with more focus and attention than any other assignment all year, at least from my perspective. And she got it turned in on time!

We still haven't heard from the mom regarding her thyroid testing or any willingness to try medication for the attentional issues. At this point there are only two weeks of school left. The bulk of the work is over, the rhythm is changing to that end-of-the-year / summer-is-around-the-corner melody! Even the weather has been cooperating; summertime is almost here!

Conclusion

Tanya survived 6th grade! Is she ready for 7th grade? We will have to wait and see. But one thing is certain, the school has learned a lot about this one little girl and in the process we have learned a lot about our school and ourselves as teachers, too.

In 1993 I started working as a full time technology teacher at another independent school here in San Francisco. It was my first full-time teaching position after twelve years of staying home with my children. I was working so hard! I would go to work early and leave late, every day. Finally one of the third grade teachers, who incidentally was from Texas and spoke with a lovely Texas drawl, came to me one day and said, "Relax, daaahhlin', y'all are doin' great. You know, it takes a year to learn a job!" I always remembered that advice; it helped me put my job into perspective. And I think about that now with Tanya. I think it takes a year to learn a school – to understand the rhythm, the culture, the expectations, and to find a way to fit into it all. Certainly it has taken us a year to learn Tanya! We have all worked very hard trying to figure her out, help her, push her, advise her, teach her. Now it is summertime and we all will have a much-deserved break. We will have to wait and see what 7th grade brings for Tanya!

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