



Who Am I?

To appreciate the spirit of this manual, I believe it is extremely important to know about the author. Understanding how my professional career developed will be a great step toward feeling the force behind the ideas inherent in this manual.

I was a camper in a summer “sleep-away” camp beginning in 1959. It was known (and still is in 2020) as “Trail’s End Camp.” The mottos of the camp were “Truth, Ethics, Courage,” and “Better for Having Been at Trail’s End Camp.” I later went on to become a counselor, group leader, assistant athletic director and “Director of Mishigos” - Yiddish for craziness. Over and over the mottos were reinforced by conferences, seminars and day to day camp life. I also realized the importance of having fun and “acting silly” from time to time. Armed with fifteen years of camping experience and no student teaching, I became a New York City junior high school math teacher.

That first year was “trial by fire.” Everything was extremely difficult. The pupils were so hard to control. I was required to take a “beginning teacher’s course” and there I would go each week and commiserate with all the other new teachers. However, I learned a lot from this course. I received pointers and suggestions from my enthusiastic and sympathetic colleagues and from the veteran mentors who knew how things should be done. And you high school people think that ninth graders are babies? Teach in middle school some day! Actually, of course, middle school can be wonderful.

Then I met up with a seasoned Dean of Discipline at my school that was known for her strictness and “meanness.” One day after school she sat down with me and for hours discussed her ideas on discipline as well as her classroom management techniques. She had an enormous number of excellent suggestions. There were some parts of her presentation that were not suitable for my personality. This is an important point in the art of teaching. Ask for help. Ask for tips. But do not think that you have to copy advice “word for word.” Listen. Take what is appropriate for you. Find your comfort zone!

The next fourteen years I’ll call the “trial and error - get better” years. I taught five classes of junior high school pupils every day. And I learned! I attended workshops, seminars, took courses and networked. I had “good” classes, “bad” classes, nice kids, troubled kids, rough days, easy days, snow days, rain days, large groups and small groups. I developed games, puzzles, survival strategies and management techniques. I rubbed elbows with great teachers, good teachers, poor teachers, great leaders and poor leaders. I tried new ideas and new methods. Some worked and some did not. The “trial and error – get better” years – a fourteen year professional growing experience!

Then, almost suddenly, things started to happen. I decided to go back to school and received a masters degree in educational administration. That was a stimulating and wonderful experience. I applied for and received an “Impact II Developer Grant” from the New York City Board of Education, on which this book is based. That opened up new paths for me.

I then applied for the position of “Dean of Discipline” at my junior high school. Although I had an excellent reputation as a teacher, the administration reluctantly gave me the job. They believed that “students should tremble with fear” when they were sent to the Dean. (My philosophy of “discipline with dignity” was different from theirs). Two years later the administration named me “Teacher of the Year.”

My experience as Dean certainly was the most powerful and influential on me as an educator to that point in my career. I believe it also uniquely qualifies me to write this book. As Dean, I did just about everything an educator could ever want to do - could ever want to see. I often think of the Christmas movie - “It’s A Wonderful Life:” Where would many students be now if I had not touched their lives? And we teachers all could and should feel that way. It is a unique gift available to members of our profession.

First I was put in charge of the pupil cafeteria. This gave me great

experience in large group control. General Norman Schwarzkopf (or Dwight Eisenhower) himself might have trouble leading a student lunchroom. We had to feed 300 students in forty-five minutes and assure that all the students were safe and happy. I handled most disciplinary matters for grades six through nine. I had an opportunity to conduct hundreds of one-on-one interviews with children. I learned to listen to their side of the story.

In this role, and later as Assistant Principal at Erasmus High School in Brooklyn and at The HS of Economics and Finance in Manhattan, I had to mediate disputes between parents, pupils, teachers and administrators. I saw evidence of child abuse, drug use, teen pregnancy and suicide. I was a doctor, a referee, a nurse, a psychiatrist, a social worker and a friend. I gave advice. I asked for advice. I learned. I provided crisis intervention for students and staff. I compiled reports, anecdotes and dossiers. I was a detective, a cop and a judge. I was involved with the New York City Police and Transit Police, the Department of Social Services, the courts, the New York City hospitals, and the local neighborhood associations. I learned more about special education and bilingual education. I learned about gangs and violence. I drove fearful students home. I saw students and teachers cry and I cried with them. I learned how to secure a school.

I was active in parents' association affairs and learned what concerns parents had in our school. I helped organize events and trips. In other words - I broadened my educational experience tremendously. And this is one very important ingredient in pedagogical improvement: Experience! And by networking with colleagues and observing their techniques, one can radically cut down on the "learning curve," the time it takes to become a very effective classroom management specialist.

I then began presenting my ideas and techniques at many staff development conferences in New York City. This culminated in 1993 in my being invited to three states by the National Council of Math Teachers to present my program at their regional conferences, the highlight of which was an unforgettable three hour mini-course in Columbus, Georgia.

Over the next 5 years, I became a high school math teacher. It provided me with the great opportunity to follow the development and maturation of the junior high school/middle-school student.

In addition, in 1992, I was a finalist in the "Funniest Teacher in New York City" contest held by a local comedy club. That was basically my story as of the initial printing of this book. However, here in 2019, so much has

happened vis a vis my experiences in education that it has become essential that I add much more to this chapter (and book).

In 1997, I became Assistant Principal at Erasmus High School which will be the topic of another book. Then, from 1997 through 2000, I performed staff and curriculum development for the schools of Brooklyn and Staten Island and in February 2001, I returned to the classroom to teach math full - time (and become an “in - house” staff development person).

This latter experience provided me with the enormously amazing opportunity to be a “rookie” teacher in a school (but a “special” rookie - one possessing 27 years of experience) who had the opportunity to perform “battle duty.”

Now that you know more about me, I hope that it will help you to understand much of the program that will be presented in the pages that follow. This sentence is approximately where (in terms of material) the first edition ended in 1995.

When this book had its first printing, I had been at Lincoln HS for three years. Let me pick up now at the remainder of my career at Lincoln and move onto the next phase of my experiences (as introduced above).

At Lincoln High School, I spent five glorious years in my first (non summer) High School experience. I served as my union’s chapter leader - this had me involved in lots of day to day conflicts between teachers and administrators. It also gave me the experience that helped teach me how to settle disagreements between people with (at times greatly) differing viewpoints on usually quite controversial and/or emotionally - charged issues.

This “expertise” helped sharpen my skills in settling disputes between pupils who often were involved in remarkably similar interpersonal disputes, in working with gang members and in other potentially volatile situations. At the time I began teaching at Lincoln, my great chairman, Harold Kornblum, encouraged me to get involved in teaching a most rigorous course - Advanced Placement Calculus. Since I hadn’t taken this class since college, it motivated me to learn massive amounts of very complicated material and quickly teach it to a group of 25 very gifted children, who would challenge me with major league questions.

This occurrence was yet another wonderful “growing” experience in my career. It helped me learn how to investigate, prepare and refine unfamiliar curricula - and adapt it to the demands of a most challenging and gifted group of youngsters. It helped put me “in the shoes” of my target population and helped me handle quite a stressful situation.

The graphing calculator was another major new ingredient - I had never used it before, and mastery of its use was required on the AP Calculus Exam. Many of my pupils, growing up in the computer age, were extremely adept with this technology and I even took “lessons” (during my lunch period) from some of them. It was a year of extremely hard work - preparing very intricate material for “double” periods totaling 90 minutes per day.

Some of the brighter pupils constantly challenged me, often “showing off” by trying to “show me up.” Often I needed to prepare into the “wee hours” of the night for these gambits by day. There were major rewards however, when large percentages of my class fared exceedingly well on the most challenging AP exam. It also reinforced my belief in always taking on new challenges - no matter how intimidating or threatening. These experiences are golden in trying to mold one’s character and in making one a much better educator. I also encourage all of my pupils and colleagues to constantly take on new challenges and to always “go for it.”

At Lincoln HS I had a wonderful position. I was teaching some wonderful children in calculus class and in algebra and served as the union representative for my school. Still, I left. Over the summer of 1997, I had received a call from the Principal of a really tough inner city High School in Brooklyn NY called Erasmus Hall High School. This school had lots of problems - dropouts, poor academic results, gangs, fighting - you name it. I was asked to become the Assistant Principal in charge of Guidance, Security and Math. I decided to take this (potentially) very stressful job. It was in keeping with my philosophy of “go for it.” It would give me 30 years of experience in one year – and it did!!

As Assistant Principal of Guidance, on a daily basis I dealt with an almost constant stream of serious disciplinary situations – gang involvement, fights, and security issues of quite an intense level. I learned so much that year - about graduation requirements, transcripts, family problems, etc. I dealt with police, hospitals, family courts, probation officers. I learned to deal with very hardcore tough disciplinary cases. It helped me to become a better classroom and school wide disciplinarian. I ran a lunchroom in which 800 pupils dined at one time in one (quite large) room. This experience taught me that I could handle almost anything.

There were challenging decisions daily that had to be made one after another. In fact, there were so many that they became “easy” to deal with. It sharpened my decision - making abilities - under stress.

The pupils and teachers loved me, trusted me, and respected me. I

gave all the same respect and kindness. But you know what? After a while, it became a bit depressing to deal day after day with discipline problems and crime related issues. I longed to return to more academically oriented pursuits. That's when the next call came. After working nineteen years at the same school, I was about to accept my fourth new job in seven years. Change was good for me - it kept my world exciting and my mind and soul growing quite positively. I suggest it for everyone from time to time.

That call came in late spring 1998. Would you like to assume the exciting role of math staff and curriculum development specialist for most of the High Schools in Brooklyn and Staten Island NY? You would be training teachers in methods of teaching math to all levels of students, you'd be developing curriculum, giving hundreds of workshops, attending just as many, learning about cutting edge studies on brain research, cooperative learning strategies, among many other stimulating items; you'd be traveling city-wide, state-wide, country-wide, meeting hundreds of different people and lots of teachers and administrators; you'd be able to write, create - learn all about the latest methods of monitoring students and study techniques. Every day you will wake up and you'll be like a kid in a candy store of educational opportunity. You bet I'll accept!

This position led to nearly three years of further personal and professional growth. But once again I was removed from actual classroom involvement. One can begin to drift and become "out of touch." In New York City at the time (about 2000-2001) there were large groups of students who were failing the HS "exit" exam (the "Regents" exam), an exam required for graduation. The curriculum folks developed a unique idea. They would send those (mostly) seniors to summer school from July 1 through August 17,^{and} tailor 3 hour intensive math class instruction for them every day.

The thinking was that these "super sized" (time wise) classes might provide the necessary blitz of knowledge. Most teachers felt it a crazy idea to take these kids who had failed algebra numerous times (and in many cases were severe behavior problems) and subject them (and their teacher) to three hours of continuous instruction. I thought so too but nothing else had worked. A problem though: No one really wanted to teach the class or, for that matter, was trained or equipped to do so. I was asked to write a training manual for this class, for there would be perhaps forty or so of these classes city wide.

In preparing the manual I literally had to "walk through" the three hour lesson 30 times in order to cover the entire year's material. I realized