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# What is Bank Street? (1973)

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# The Bank Street Thinkers

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Foundational Knowledge to  
Support our Roots and Wings



# What Is Bank Street?

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Barbara Biber (1973)

Self-presentation for an institution seems to be as difficult and fraught with uncertainty as it is for an individual. After presenting Bank Street to you through the beautiful pictures and artifacts, a nagging question remains: do you really see what we are like, underneath the images and the activities, at the level of purpose, values, and commitment? Toward that end we still seem to be dependent on words.

There is, indeed, a coherent system of values, theoretical premises, and designs for implementation underlying the multiple activities and programs of Bank Street. There are, in fact, agreed-on components of what constitutes optimal learning situations for children and adults which these various programs strive to incorporate, wherever they are initiated geographically, whether in the private or public sector.

The farther we go from home base, geographically or ideologically, the greater is the challenge to adapt these principles and practices in ways that do not create a school culture that is antithetical to the family life patterns or to subculture mores of given populations. This process of adaptation is not a straightaway course. There are limits to be watched for if the extent of adaptation is not to violate the essential educational aims. We have found that a great deal of common ground can be established where it might not be expected by explaining, sharing, demonstrating, especially by opening up purposes behind activities, and, of course, by listening and sensing others' intents and meanings. It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, that without some commonality of values about what child-

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*Lecture originally given at the Bank Street College of Education Convocation luncheon, November 27, 1973.*

hood should be and how people and children should live together in school, these concepts and methods for education are not likely to take firm root.

## **A learning environment**

First, I want to review briefly the components of a learning environment for children toward which we aspire. Our own Children's School is the closest approximation, but it, too, is constantly in a process of change since the implementation of goals cannot stay put certainly not so long as school life remains sensitive to the vicissitudes of social change and not so long as changing theory and new research findings point to new ways of understanding and guiding learning and growth in childhood.

We aim for an abundance of experience and encounter for the children, of the kind that will increase the range and depth of sensitivity to the world around them. We aim for a variety of situations to which the children need to accommodate and plenty of alternatives from which to make choices. Direct contact with phenomena and people takes priority over the vicarious; the salient situations for learning are outside the classroom as well as inside. Emotional resonance to the doing, making, and thinking aspects of learning is very much welcomed.

We aim for actively involved children acquiring competence and a sense of their own competence. We do not see the need for contrived techniques to motivate children; instead we find a healthy fund of curiosity and a drive to produce an effect on the environment. Satisfied curiosity and the intrinsic rewards of mastery are powerful generators of renewed motivation. Active investigation, independent pursuit, learning through discovery are dominant in the learning climate, but we respect and honor the kind of content for which pre-structured information or formal instruction may be more efficient and, in fact, satisfying, in its own way. The curriculum of activities is kept flexible but there is a planned framework of what basic knowledge is necessary for effective functioning at different stages of development and what skills are needed to acquire it.

The teacher uses every opportunity to foster intellectual mastery, to promote cognitive power by creating a pervasive climate of why and wherefore and wherefrom kind of thinking. The ongoing experiences of school life, rather than specially designed materials, are the primary source for stimulating a conceptually organized universe, adapted to developmental levels. The teacher guides the children toward creating a network of relationships that bind the discrete elements of experience. In the earlier years, thinking is stimulated in terms of similarities and differences, of the orderly passing of time or the transformations of growth and growing up, or the mastery of spatial reality in the immediacy of a school building; and later, in the symbolism of map thinking, for example. Gradually, thinking moves toward the intangibles—the relations between behavior and motivation, between evidence and proof, between fact and opinion.

It would be a pity to restrict the growth and majesty of the human mind and spirit to the rational processes served by cognitive powers and we deplore the educational schema where this, in fact, occurs. In our philosophy and practice, we feel responsible to nurture equally the intuitive processes, the capacity for feeling and emotion, for reflective as well as goal-directed thinking in order to bring the totality of imaginative, productive functioning to its highest power. We provide therefore, ample oppor-

tunity, equipment, and encouragement for many forms of symbolic expression, for reliving experience by representing it in personally meaningful terms, for fantasizing as well as reasoning, for synthesizing the subjective and objective aspects of experience. For example, over the years, we have developed spontaneous dramatic play and creative play making as a component of curriculum through which children create this synthesis for themselves, with the support of teachers aware of the complexities of the processes involved.

A classroom embodies a way of life among people. We attempt to build a social environment in which children are known and responded to as individuals, where the interaction between adult and child and between child and child is supportive of learning, and where the children come to identify with the teachers' goals for their learning. We expect teachers to carry dual roles of support and control, to exercise that measure of understandable authority that is essential to a functioning learning environment. We want the children to be aware of themselves as initiators in their learning roles, to establish their individual identities, and at the same time, to grow through the emergence of the self in the cooperative, collective group experiences of play and learning. We see a full-bodied school life as a prime source of pleasure and challenge in childhood.

We welcome the ways in which the open education movement resembles this concept of a learning environment, as far as it does. At the same time, we worry that it may suffer from a too-rapid, precipitate enactment without sufficient recognition and investment in the tremendous task of preparing teachers to carry these new roles. Our own Children's School and its faculty is an essential instrument for our whole program. It is the expression of theory in reality and as such is used extensively by our programs for the education of school personnel.

## **Preparation of teachers**

How do we develop people who can create and function in this kind of learning environment—teachers, guidance workers, principals, supervisors, teachers of teachers? I will limit myself to comments on our master's degree program for the preparation of teachers, which is oldest in our history and has been the theoretical paradigm for later programs.

At the base is a three-part concept of a competent teacher: first, an extensive reservoir of knowledge and specific skills for the teaching task, based on psychodynamic concepts of learning and growth in childhood; second, capacity for meaningful communication and relationship with adults and children of varying backgrounds and life-styles, and third, enough personal insight, maturity and resilience to make the currents and cross-currents of emotion contribute to a quality of depth in the learning climate. Our staff is now engaged in specifying and codifying this broad formulation as part of the movement toward Competency Based Teacher Education in this state.

In our master's program for the preparation of teachers, we have had a long established pattern for integrating theory and practice. Responsible apprentice teaching, from the beginning, is concurrent with mastery of developmental theory, teaching techniques, and educational principles. Major time is allotted to work in a variety of classrooms. Continuous cross-referencing between study about teaching and really trying to teach is stimulated: how does theory make perplexing classroom realities more

understandable? Conversely, where do these realities seem to challenge and upset going theory? This is what we might call third person thinking—analytical, conceptual, probing—asking what factors condition children’s learning, what deflects developmental sequences, how does one sort out social-political issues from the educational issues that are the center of the critique of education in our times?

On another plane, we are equally interested in advancing the student-teacher’s self-knowledge as it pertains to building an individually viable identity in the teaching role. For many, the training experience, the harsh realities of classrooms in an urban setting, the exposure to a new philosophy of education and the values implicit in it, the scary expectation that one should be able to function autonomously, democratically, and even imaginatively, becomes a deeply stirring personal experience. What is aroused is a full measure of first person thinking – greater awareness of one’s own strengths and weaknesses and the search for the best functioning match between one’s own talents, uncertainties, life-style, and the image of the teaching role for which one is preparing. What is expressed is often a heady blend of anxiety and exhilaration.

We consider it essential that there be support mechanisms to make this an integrated program of personal and professional development, to make it possible for the students to experience deeply the interplay of cognitive and non-cognitive elements as part of a learning experience of their own. Our advisement program is the way we meet this need. Subgroups of 10 or 11 students work closely with an advisor in weekly conference groups for which there is no set agenda. The conference group becomes an intimate forum for exchange of experience—an opportunity to express reactions, criticisms, perplexity, and to engage in give and take of ideas with peers. The advisor, an experienced educator, accepts the relevance of individual reactions in this setting while channeling the content toward more generalized problems, issues, techniques of interest to the group as a whole. In addition, the advisor meets with students individually, in bi-weekly conferences, visits them in their classroom placements, and becomes the key figure in coordinating the student’s development toward competence in the teaching role and consolidation of the student’s identity as a teacher.

There is, as you might suspect, a hidden curriculum. We have assumed for many years that, beyond the structured curriculum that is provided, the students internalize the pervasive qualities of the learning environment we try to create for them—that the qualitative characteristics of their own teaching styles will reflect, later, the qualities of their own personal experience in learning to become teachers. It is gratifying that, in a recent study of the Cary Fellows Program, this assumption is borne out.

This basic paradigm for preparation of school personnel is necessarily adjusted to differences in our multiple programs—to full-time vs. part-time study, to the various roles involved. But in all, there is a common factor: we control the conditions of the learning environment and each program is not an isolate. It is part of the total Gestalt of the institution.

## **Programs for change**

Our third orbit of work comprises programs of action for change in the sector of public education where we move in to the way things are. The approaches are varied. Some are geared toward making an impact on a broad scale without engaging intimately with the educational processes per se. Among these

are the production of materials for teachers—the *Bank Street Readers*, films, learning tools such as the *Early Childhood Discovery Materials*, or acting as consultants to the designing of pioneer programs such as Head Start or the Child Development Associate program or taking part in national assessment programs or participating in conferences or contributing to the educational and psychological literature.

By contrast, other activities in the public sector are active ongoing cooperative ventures, located within a given school or school system or as part of community-based operations such as day care. In these instances, members of our staff maintain continuous important working relations with the school personnel. Principles, goals, and methods of the in-depth programs for children and teachers are adapted and paced to the realities of each situation and especially to the delicate condition of being the outsider coming in. In the early days of our public school activities, our focus was on bringing about change through working primarily with teachers under generally benign but non-participant principals. In recent years, we have extended our work to include organizational structures and those in leadership positions, recognizing that teachers alone can be expected to be successful heralds of the new, only if they are part of a larger structure of support.

The Bank Street Follow Through program, now in its fifth year, is perhaps the most highly developed paradigm for our way of functioning as change agents in the larger educational scene. The distinguishing feature, organizationally, is the focus on total staff development. Toward this end, the training design works in two ways: one, through one-to-one conferences for dealing with the concrete interests, problems, suggestions of individuals; the other through group sessions which include people carrying varying roles with different degrees of authority and different kinds of vested interests in the children's school experience—from principals to parents. These mechanisms have been developed for the sake of establishing mutuality of purposes and understanding of what is being undertaken among all those involved.

Equally essential in the design of this program is the analytic process that proceeds through use of systematic techniques for studying children and curriculum and for self-study by the adults engaged in the work. Once again, third person and first person thinking appear as a dual approach for facilitating feedback, from deepened understanding to revision of school practices. This combination of methods—highly developed person-to-person interaction plus systematic analytic procedures—represents our conviction that basic change will not occur or last through distribution of learning tools and techniques or through dissemination of ideas unless attitudes, perceptions, and commitment of school people at the grass roots are part of a fundamental change process. This takes time, lots of time, and deep involvement of those who undertake—maybe presume is a better word—to be change agents in an established system.

### **Our educational perspective**

At this point, I would like to sum up briefly the overall educational perspective that governs our institutional priorities and shapes the designs of our multiple programs.

The school as a social institution has broad responsibility for the development of the whole person—his affective and social as well as his intellectual development. The quality of experience

in school can have a differentiated impact not only on the proficiency of intellectual functioning but in shaping the feelings, the attitudes, the values, the sense of self, the images of good and evil in the world about and the vision of what the life of man with man might be. True, the school is only one part of a constellation of influences—the family, the impact of poverty and discrimination, the prevalence of market-place values in our society—but it dare not forsake its responsibility nor lose sight of the extent of its potency.

The school is not neutral ground. Educational goals are inevitably value-bound. In our perspective we value the kind of effective, autonomous individuality that, in maturity, evolves toward social commitment. We work toward the kind of democratic intra-group functioning that is built on non-authoritarian forms of control, participation of the governed in decision-making and especially on non-predatory modes of interchange among people at all stages.

We have a theory of the learning process derived from several sources - from the developmental theory of Werner and Piaget, from the psychodynamic thinking of Hartmann and Erikson, and from educational thinkers: John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Harriet Johnson, Susan Isaacs. Essentially, it means that cognitive functions cannot be separated from personal and interpersonal processes; that curriculum and method should be adapted to developmental sequences and patterns, as these are conditioned by varying life circumstance; and that the optimal educative process is one that maximizes the child's interaction with the materials, the ideas, and the people of his environment. We have lately christened it—the **Developmental-Interaction Approach**.

We are committed to repeated cycles of innovate, observe, study, evaluate and revise. Toward this end there is, and has been through the years, a pervasive informal climate of experimentation. There are also now systematic evaluation studies geared toward formative more than summative techniques. There is an organized program of research in which the roster of studies reflects our involvement in probing the depths of the learning-teaching processes—for example, studies of the psychological impact of contrasting school environments, non-verbal representation in early childhood, cognitive aspects of play, personality aspects of the teaching role, teaching and learning styles in city schools, and the social organization of Head Start centers.

Finally, we are committed to using our private, independent learning environments as laboratories for the development of optimal learning settings for children and adults and as the base for making an impact on the direction of public education. How to do this had its beginnings in Harlem thirty years ago and is right now being reformulated in the light of extensive, varied experience in the intervening years.

I would like to close with a self-searching remark—for the Bank Street self, that is. We are well aware that our increased size, number of activities, programs, and staff in recent years are means for increasing the scope of influence of an institution. We are equally aware that expansion brings a degree of slippage from our core educational perspective, which needs careful monitoring. Still, we are not the only institution that needs to face the struggle between size and integrity of purpose or between idealism and solvency. So—we keep trying.