A Brief History: Bank Street College of Education

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Mission Statement

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

Bank Street was settled in the early 1800s, when Greenwich Village was in fact a small village north of the bustling Lower Manhattan commercial district. The street today looks much like it did a century ago. It is tree-lined and quaint. Many of its federal-style townhouses are landmarks. But Bank Street is far more than a picturesque few blocks in Greenwich Village. For nearly forty years, an educational institution was located at 69 Bank Street, and it gave "Bank Street" another meaning. Indeed, early childhood professionals the world over know of Bank Street as a particular approach to the education of children—a way of learning that emphasizes child development and interaction. They know of Bank Street as a tutorial method of educating teachers. And they know of Bank Street as a philosophy that emphasizes humane and social values.

Bank Street, the street, gave its name to this influential strand of the progressive movement in 20th century education. But the story of Bank Street, the institution, began fifteen years before its association with the street.
In the year 1916, conventional wisdom had it that children were to be seen and not heard. Typically, public education consisted of a teacher, usually a woman, standing in front of her class and lecturing or conducting drills.

Yet there were in New York City at that time imaginative women who asked whether it had to be that way. Harriet Johnson was one, Caroline Pratt another, Elizabeth Irwin yet another. And into their midst, on the eve of World War I, came a young woman with a rich academic background, a receptive mind, and boundless energy and determination: Lucy Sprague Mitchell.

Mrs. Mitchell had been the first Dean of Women at the University of California at Berkeley. She knew John Dewey, the revolutionary educator, and was influenced by his personality and writings and by the writing and thinking of other humanists of the day. In New York, she was caught up in the new milieu and was stirred by the activism of her new friends. Like them, Lucy Mitchell looked upon the building of a new kind of education as essential to the building of a better world, a more rational and humane society.

Mrs. Mitchell therefore decided to devote her life to improving schools for children. She and the colleagues she drew around her knew that reform meant not just a strengthening of the kinds of schools then in existence, but a fundamental change in schools— partly in structure, but most of all in the concept of how children learn. She determined to draw together a group of thinkers from different fields to study a variety of new experimental schools. Mrs. Mitchell discussed her ideas with her cousin, Elizabeth Coolidge, a musician and scholar who had recently inherited a considerable fortune. Elizabeth liked what she heard and asked for a detailed written plan for what was to become the Bureau of Educational Experiments.

With the help of her husband Wesley Clair Mitchell, a leading economist of the time, and her friend Harriet Johnson, Mrs. Mitchell drafted a proposal for the Bureau, and it was accepted. Mrs. Coolidge promised to underwrite the venture with $50,000 annually for ten years—with two unusual provisions: that there be no reports on how the money was spent and that the entire sum be spent every year.

And so, in 1916, the Bureau of Educational Experiments was born and soon lodged in rented quarters on Varick Street in Lower Manhattan. Lucy Mitchell set out to conduct research on child development in experimental schools and to that end she staffed the Bureau with a doctor, psychologists, a social worker, and teachers—all experienced with children, and all at work on a joint study in as free an atmosphere as possible.
By 1918, a nursery school was opened at the Bureau's new quarters in a series of houses (including the Mitchells') on West 12th and West 13th Streets. Harriet Johnson directed the Nursery School, whose graduates were passed along to Caroline Pratt's City and Country School. And all the while, Bureau staff continued to observe and collect data on the development of the children.

Mrs. Mitchell herself became a student of children's language, and she recorded children's remarks and the stories they told. She concluded that formal imposition of "meaning" hampered children's language as a medium of creative expression. She found that the children's natural expression reflected their keen awareness of the world.

An important fruit of her research was the *Here and Now Storybook*, which was published in 1921 and became an all-time bestseller among children's books. It was the first step in the Bureau's effort to improve the quality of children's literature, an effort that continues to this day.

Children at the Nursery School and at City and Country were given opportunities to draw, paint, and model in clay—unusual forms of expression in schools at that time. Indeed, their education was recognized as something other than a prescribed curriculum. Children in the Harriet Johnson Nursery School and at City and County, under the auspices of the Bureau, had all of New York City as their classroom: to ride a ferry boat, to visit a zoo, to look at a massive bridge—to inquire, to understand, and to replicate them and their purposes in clay, with blocks, and with paints.

In 1926, the Working Council of the Bureau began a process of appraisal of the program of the past ten years and a rethinking of objectives and strategies. What emerged from this process was a bold new strategy for bringing about change in the field of education: the development of a teacher education program that would result in a new kind of teacher for a new kind of school. Research would continue; the clinical approach in the real world of the classroom would continue; the work on children's literature would continue. But the central strategy for effecting educational reform would be the development of a teacher education program that would serve as a model to the education world.

In 1930 came another historic moment in the Bureau's life: the acquisition of the old Fleischman's Yeast brewery and storage building. Its address was to become synonymous with the best in early childhood education: 69 Bank Street. It was fireproof, sturdy, and spacious, had room for the Nursery School to expand and, most important, had room for the new Cooperative School for Teachers.

This was a joint venture between the Bureau and eight other experimental schools. Student teachers worked at their various schools Monday through Thursday and came to Bank Street for classes, seminars, and conferences from Thursday afternoon through Saturday noon. While it might have been simpler to have had all of them working at the school on Bank Street, the staff welcomed the diversity of experience that the different teachers brought together from their city, suburban, and rural schools.

One of the important experiences for student teachers was something called "the long trip"—a field visit to some distant site: a coal mine, or a venture with visiting nurses, some complete change of venue to unsettle preconceptions and to challenge the monolithic thinking that a teacher might have built up over a period of time.
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From these field trips and from other sources grew the advisement process. Unique to Bank Street, somewhat like the system at an English university, the process features a senior member of the Bank Street faculty and several student teachers in an intense personal and professional examination of what it takes to be a good teacher. Individual student teachers learn to build on their personal strengths and correct their weaknesses to become the best teachers they can be. Today, advisement remains at the core of all graduate study at the College.

After the move to Bank Street, the study of children continued at the Bureau, and the results were published in books, journals, and regular bulletins for dissemination to the educational community. New curricula were developed, classroom material produced, and children's books written. In 1937, a Division of Publications was established to do the work of writing for and about children. The Bank Street Writers Laboratory was founded, and it continues today to give encouragement to writers to produce books for children that are consistent with the Bank Street understanding of how children develop. Among the writers affiliated with the Lab were such shining lights of children's literature as Margaret Wise Brown (Good Night Moon) and Maurice Sendak (Where the Wild Things Are).

In 1943, the New York City Board of Education asked that workshops be given to some of its teachers on the Bank Street methods, and Bank Street faculty began to work directly with public school teachers in their own classrooms. The innovative approaches that had long been the work of Bank Street were no longer considered a threat to the established order. In 1946, Bank Street began to offer night and weekend courses for nonmatriculated students. Soon some 500 people were attending these courses.

By 1964, the federal government began to seek out the educational expertise of Bank Street with some frequency. With the Civil Rights Act in the offing, the U.S. Commissioner of Education asked Bank Street's president, John H. Niemeyer, to consult with southern universities to create models for a desegregation program. That same year, Bank Street faculty were asked to help shape the national Head Start Program and to create guidelines for Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. (Indeed, the first Head Start concept paper prepared by staff in the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity said, "The basic Head Start classroom should work like a Bank Street College elementary classroom for nursery/kindergarten.") The College embarked on program activities on behalf of Project Head Start in 1965 with a national workshop for administrators of the program, and soon, the College was also providing technical assistance to the network of local Head Start programs.
program, combined with an out-placement service. It soon established one of the first national model Head Start programs, the 42nd Street Early Childhood Model Head Start Training Center, which continued in operation well into the 1970s.

Bank Street's Research Division became part of a national network of Early Childhood Research Centers devoted to studies relevant to young children in Head Start and similar programs.

In 1966, Bank Street opened its Early Childhood and Family Resources Center in Manhattan, another major effort in adapting the College's child development approach to minority and poor children and their families. Research studies contributed to the training and development of paraprofessionals in work with young children.

Also in the 1960s, with the support of the Carnegie Corporation, Bank Street's Educational Resources Center was started to help in the education of students handicapped by segregation and/or poverty. Over the years in Harlem and later elsewhere, new methods were brought into play with 34,000 of these children.

Another aspect of Bank Street's concern with the quality of education was the Bank Street Readers. Published in 1965 by the Macmillan Company, they were the first multiracial, urban-oriented readers portraying contemporary culture, graphics, and language. The Bank Street Readers broke the "Dick and Jane" mold and set new standards for the publishing industry. During the 1960s and '70s, one out of four children in city schools used the Bank Street Readers.

From 1968 to 1981, Bank Street was one of the prime sponsors of the federal Follow Through program, which provides educational support services for elementary school children and their families in economically disadvantaged areas. Bank Street, which had participated in the design of Follow Through, was asked by school officials and parents in 14 communities across the country to run Follow Through programs in 43 schools. Several of these schools were designated as Demonstration Centers by the U.S. Office of Education and the National Institute of Education to disseminate the Bank Street Follow Through method and materials to schools and educators around the world. Bank Street's involvement with Follow Through continued into the early 1990s.

1970: Bank Street Leaves Bank Street

The day had long since arrived when the Fleischman's Yeast building on Bank Street could no longer answer the needs of an educational facility of national significance, now in its second half-century of service. Reluctantly, in 1970, Bank Street left the street that had given the school its name and so much more. A new facility was built on West 112th Street, in the heart of Manhattan's Upper West Side educational community.

The address of the College had changed, but not its drive toward innovation.

In 1972, the New Perspectives program of weekend graduate courses was launched to attract new students, to provide teaching opportunities for faculty and practitioners from other parts of the country, and to experiment with new
courses. Since then, many thousands of students have come to Bank Street for one- and two-weekend courses in early childhood and elementary education, parenting and parent education, special education, supervision and administration, and computers in education.

In 1976, a concept old to Bank Street had a new beginning in 50,000 wooded acres of Harriman Park, part of the Palisades Interstate Park. Bank Street’s Tiorati Workshop helps teachers learn how to integrate the natural environment with work in the language, musical, and visual arts and in the social, physical, and mathematical sciences. This study of the environment is simply an extension of the concept of the community as classroom. Since its founding, hundreds of teachers and thousands of school children have participated in Tiorati’s programs. Tiorati continues today, with classes for children and teachers in Harriman Park, at Bank Street, and in public schools.

Also in 1976, a Graduate School program in Museum Education began to train a group of new professionals who were comfortable and qualified to work in both museums, with their ever-expanding educational function, and in classrooms. Later, Museum Leadership and Museum Special Education programs were added. Today, graduates of the programs are on the staff of nearly every major museum in the country. Bank Street also started an Infant and Parent Development program to meet the need for broadly trained professionals to work with infants and toddlers and their parents.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandated education "in the least restrictive environment" for children with special educational needs. The inclusion of these children in regular classrooms required a reconceptualization of teacher education and practice, and this became an important part of the work of Bank Street faculty. Faculty members are still working actively to foster inclusion in the public schools, and Bank Street now offers graduate degree programs in Special Education, Bilingual Special Education, and dual degree programs in social work with both Columbia University and Hunter College.

In the 1970s, Bank Street staff also managed the Parent/Child Development Center Project, a national program to study and replicate exemplary centers for mothers and their young children, infants to age three. Staff worked closely with centers in New Orleans, LA, Houston, TX, and Birmingham, AL.

Bank Street in the 1980s

Historically, Bank Street has responded to urgent and emerging needs in education. In 1980, Bank Street saw powerful new information technologies on the horizon and was concerned about their effect on children’s learning. So the College founded the Center for Children and Technology (CCT), the first of its kind devoted to research and development exclusively for children. Center researchers examined the impact of new technologies and created such models of interactive software as *Earth Lab* and *Project Inquire* to foster children’s thinking, problem-solving, and literacy skills. The Center also found ways to use new technologies to improve the organization of learning in the classroom and to provide new information to help with the restructuring of educational goals and methods in the Information Age.
In 1981, Bank Street was awarded a $2.65 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create a television series, computer software, and books that would enhance children's interest in and understanding of science, mathematics, and technology. The resulting materials, known collectively as *The Voyage of the Mimi*, established yet another Bank Street milestone in the history of American education. In 1984, the TV series – based on a humpback whale research expedition – premiered on Public Broadcasting System stations across the country. Related computer software and print materials were published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

*The Voyage of the Mimi* received high praise, won awards for excellence in children's television and educational software, and – most important – is still bringing science alive year after year in classrooms across the country. Bank Street's Project in Science and Mathematics, which created the *Mimi* materials, also got involved in helping schools use the new materials to their fullest potential through a spinoff project called MASTTE (Math, Science, and Technology Teacher Education). The great success of the first *Mimi* voyage led to *The Second Voyage of the Mimi*, which was funded jointly by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation. On this voyage, released in 1988, the Mimi sailed to the Yucatan to explore Mayan ruins and solve an ancient mystery. *The Second Voyage* is also widely used in schools today. *Mimi* materials continue to be published by Sunburst Communications, a division of Houghton Mifflin.

In another spinoff, this from *The Second Voyage*, CCT staff created one of the earliest interactive videodiscs, *Palenque* allowed students to "walk" through the Mayan ruins at Palenque on the Yucatan peninsula, to take "photographs" of the site and store them in an "album," and to call up, on screen, expert archaeologists to answer their questions about the ruins and about Mayan civilization.

In 1982, the *Bank Street Writer*, the College's first venture into computer software, set new industry standards for ease of use. The *Writer* was for several years the most widely used word-processing software in schools across the country and was also a bestseller among adults for home use. It was followed by other award-winning Bank Street software, including the *Bank Street Filer* and *Bank Street Wordbench*.

In 1984, Bank Street formed the Media Group, which consolidated the longstanding Publications Division with newer ventures in software development, television, video products, and records. The Bank Street setting provides unique opportunities to draw on staff resources and to field-test products with children and teachers in actual classrooms.

The 1980s also saw the College conducting a series of major research studies, including *The Prekindergarten Policy Study*, an analysis and evaluation of Project Giant Step, New York City's prekindergarten program; *The School-Based Mental Health Study*; *The National Public School Early Childhood Study*; "Women and Technology: A New Basis for Change"; "Home is Where the Heart Is," an examination of the plight of homeless preschoolers in New York City; and "Who is Teaching? Early Childhood Teachers in New York City's Publicly Funded Programs."

In 1989, Bank Street, as the lead organization in a consortium that included Harvard and Brown Universities, won a five-year, $5 million award from the U.S. Department of Education to serve as the national Center for Technology in Education, its mission being to examine and evaluate the
uses of technology in the classroom and to explore innovative ways to improve education through the new technologies.

Although CCT left Bank Street after the grant was completed to become part of the Education Development Center (EDC), we still collaborate on a number of major projects, with funding from both government and private sources. In two of those projects, CCT has played an important role in Bank Street's efforts to integrate technology across the teacher preparation curriculum.

**Bank Street in the 1990s**

The economic and educational gap between haves and have-nots widened in the decade of the '80s, and continued to do so in the '90s, with American children comprising the largest subgroup in poverty. Poor children in general, and poor minority children in particular, experience a much higher level of developmental, educational, and social risk. The high risks start even before birth and continue through adolescence. Poor children are less likely to achieve in school, more likely to drop out before completing high school, and more likely to enter a premature path to parenthood as teenagers.

All of this has resulted in tremendous challenges for parents, families, employers, schools, and social service agencies. Early in the 1990s, every division of Bank Street College began studying the changing needs of American children and families - at school, at home, and in the workplace - and devising strategies to address those needs. Central to the work of Bank Street in the 1990s was improving the quality of public education, early childhood education, and child care, and working with other organizations and agencies to develop innovative programs for children, youth, and families - especially those at high risk. These concerns are still central to our work in the 21st century.

Our efforts to address the challenges of the 1990s were many and varied, not only in New York but in more than twenty other cities. We recognized the great need for well-prepared school leaders. Our Principals Institute, in collaboration with the New York City Board of Education, produced nearly 400 school leaders in the 1990s, most of them women or members of minority groups. The Principals Institute is now entering its twelfth year of service to the City's schools. Our Leadership Center works with new principals and with established principals who wish to hone or refresh their skills.

We recognized the need to restructure schools to make them more responsive to the needs of students and teachers. The Center for School Restructuring continues its work of the 1990s today, restructuring middle schools in New York City; its model was adapted by the City as the model for all middle schools restructuring. In the early and middle years of the decade, we undertook a restructuring of elementary schools in Pittsburgh, PA through the Vision 21 project. And we started the New Beginnings project, a program for restructuring early childhood education in the Newark, NJ public schools. New Beginnings, funded by several foundations and the Newark Public Schools at about $1.5 million per year, is presently at work in more than 100 kindergarten through third grade classrooms in Newark.

We were, and are, concerned about the disproportion between teachers of color in city schools and their students -
the vast majority of the children are of color in America's great cities, but only a small number of teachers and administrators are members of minorities. We coordinated the preparation of minority teachers in ten cities in the Northeast and Midwest through the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Pathways to Teaching Careers program, a national effort to prepare more minority teachers. We also aggressively sought funding from the federal government and foundations to bring more minority students into Bank Street's programs. Currently, nearly 30% of our students are people of color – one of the highest proportions among members of the Holmes Group, a national association of teacher preparation programs.

To address directly some of the issues facing children and families, the Division of Continuing Education, Bank Street's primary outreach arm, opened Head Start and childcare programs at Genesis/Robert F. Kennedy Center, a housing complex for formerly homeless and low-income families. We also operate an Early Head Start program, working with young mothers and their infants and toddlers in their own homes. Another program prepares women, including those who are moving from welfare to work, for careers in childcare. The Institute for a Child Care Continuum is presently working, in both California and New York, with the largest – but hardest to reach – childcare community, those family, neighbors, and friends who care in their own homes for the young children of working parents. And our annual Infancy Institute, in the Graduate School, offers an intensive weeklong program of professional development for child care professionals, including directors of programs.

The Liberty Partnerships Program (LPP), initiated by the State of New York, and partly funded by the State, has just completed its eleventh year at Bank Street. LPP is designed to keep disadvantaged young people in school and to help them go on to college or into meaningful employment. Students enter the program in sixth or seventh grade and participate in a wide range of activities, including academic support, counseling, and enrichment experiences, through their high school years. Over the life of the program, 90% of students have gone on to colleges as varied as Bard, CUNY, Vassar, Mt. Holyoke, SUNY, and Cornell.

In 1996, Bank Street's Graduate School, recognizing the profound changes taking place in America's classrooms, undertook the first major analysis and restructuring of its entire range of programs since the 1930s. As a consequence of that analysis and restructuring, which is ongoing, we have made major changes in the structure of our programs, with two principal ends in view: to prepare teachers for the broad range of student backgrounds and abilities in their classrooms, and to prepare them to integrate technology across the curriculum in their schools. Several grants have allowed us to provide our faculty with intensive preparation in integrating technology into the Graduate School's curriculum, continuing the Bank Street tradition of modeling for students what they are learning to teach.

Also in the 1990s, Bank Street launched several major research projects. The First Steps Study, a federally funded analysis of the First Steps literacy curriculum, was conducted
in public schools in Worcester, MA, and the findings of the study have been widely reported in professional journals and at conferences.

A second major research project, the Small Schools Study, examined small schools in Chicago over a period of more than two years, gathering a wealth of data on the performance of students, teachers, and administrators. The first large study of the efficacy of small schools, it was conducted by a team of educational researchers led by Bank Street and by the Dean of the Graduate School, Patricia Wasley. The team included such noted educators as Michele Fine of the CUNY Graduate Center, Linda Powell of Teachers College, and Sherri King of the Mamaroneck (NY) Public Schools.

In 1998, in response to New York State’s mandating prekindergarten classes for all children, Bank Street founded the Center for Universal Prekindergarten. A resource not only for New York but also for fledgling prekindergarten programs across the nation, the Center provides professional development for early childhood teachers, addresses policy issues, and advocates for excellent programs for our youngest public school students.

Bank Street’s Publications and Media Group developed more than seventy titles in the Ready To Read series, published by Bantam; served as educational consultants to the Nickleodeon preschool series, “Allegra’s Window,” since its inception; developed a series of chapter books, West Side Kids, published by Hyperion; scripted a series of videos for children based on Bible stories; developed a series of books on controversial scientists, called Ideas on Trial; with McGraw-Hill, produced a Pre-K Math Curriculum Guide; produced several Pre-K through 8th Grade Scholastic Curriculum Guides; and began serving as educational consultants to The New York Times on its Learning Network, which provides teachers with online guidance in using the events of the day in their classrooms. Learning Network presently reaches 22,000 schools in 72 countries.

Bank Street in the 21st Century

A new century and a new millennium find Bank Street drawing on the strengths of its past as it prepares itself to meet the challenges of the future. Many of the challenges of the past two decades persist: the scarcity of well-prepared teachers and school leaders; the frequently mediocre and underfunded nature of programs of care and education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; the underperformance of many children, particularly those in inner-city neighborhoods; and the still-present gap between the haves and have-nots, especially, for Bank Street, as it applies to the resources available to children in urban schools.

As a consequence of the persistence of these issues, many of our major programs from the 1990s and earlier continue: New Beginnings, the Principals Institute and the Leadership Center, Head Start and Early Head Start, the Liberty Partnerships Program, the Tiorati Workshop, and the Center for Universal Prekindergarten. We continue to work in all areas of education and care that touch on the lives of children, from birth through adolescence. Their teachers, their schools, their neighborhoods — all come within Bank Street’s purview, and all are the beneficiaries of programs developed and implemented by the College.

The much-anticipated report on the Small Schools Study was released in June 2000, and already has been widely cited as a work that will allow genuine assessment of the impact of
small schools nationwide and will serve to guide both existing small schools and those that are being planned.

We expect to continue our work in improving the teacher preparation curriculum, in which we have taken a leading national role. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) has designated Bank Street as one of only three superb graduate schools of education in the country. The National Board on Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has designated Bank Street as one of only five resource centers in America. We are honored by such recognition but have no intention of resting on our laurels. There is still much work to be done to prepare teachers well for today’s classrooms, and we enthusiastically accept our role in that work.

And, of course, with all our programs of research and outreach, at Bank Street’s core is the provision of the best education possible for more than 900 graduate students and for 430 children in the School for Children, and 60 infants and toddlers in the Family Center. The Bank Street Family Center is a model childcare center, in which one-fourth of the children have special needs and are fully integrated into the day-to-day activities of the classroom. These components of the College are the heart of our work, the place where teaching and learning are central to the everyday fabric of Bank Street’s life.

The world today is vastly changed from the world of 1916. And Bank Street is not what it was in the early days of the Bureau of Educational Experiments. There have been great changes in the institution. Yet, in one remarkable way it has stayed the same: the focus remains on children – their needs and how to meet them.