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Introduction

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The Bank Street Thinkers

Foundational Knowledge to
Support our Roots and Wings



Introduction

Peggy McNamara

As we approach our centennial year Bank Street College is taking time to pause and reflect on the work of progressive educators who came before us as we consider our trajectories into the future. Bank Street Thinkers are a series of papers and lectures that were digitized in 1999 in an effort to preserve and share a glimpse into our foremothers' work with children, families, teachers, and administrators. Over some forty years I have maintained a relationship with the College. My story is not unique. The longevity of connections to the College is a strength that has nurtured and fostered individuals as well as the institution itself over these hundred years. In addition, the values, theories, and practices shared in Bank Street Thinkers have served as foundational knowledge.

With these ideas in mind, this pamphlet has been organized according to themes. We begin with some **Bank Street history** as Barbara Biber provides her perspective on what she views Bank Street to be in 1973. The next two articles explore **the concepts of teaching and teacher preparation**. Biber and Snyder invite the reader to examine the elements of good teaching while Lewis and Windsor narrate how the Bank Street Teacher Education program addressed the need for teachers during the 1950's. Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Charlotte Winsor relate critical aspects of **our long history of social studies teaching and curriculum development**. Mitchell ruminates on the complexities of definitions when analyzing social studies and Winsor describes how a social studies curriculum was enacted at City and Country, a private elementary school, which has been connected to Bank Street over many decades. The role of **language and play** in young children's growth process are elucidated through Claudia Lewis' story of kindergarteners' language play and Biber's

theoretical and practical analysis of the role of play in the lives of children. Finally, Edna Shapiro cautions the reader about the dangers of describing **competence in schools** therefore “...becoming an omnibus concept” that does not effectively communicate anything useful to educators. Through the creation of this pamphlet and salon experience, I am taking an opportunity to introduce Bank Street Thinkers through my multiple lenses as alumni, cooperating teacher, professional developer, adjunct instructor, core faculty and administrator. I invite readers to engage with these papers in whatever ways that make sense for them in their current educational contexts.

The first essay in this publication recounts Biber’s attempt to answer the question “*What is Bank Street?*” at the 1973 Bank Street Graduate School of Education convocation lecture. My story began in 1975 only two years later. But instead of asking “what” I asked “why,” as I contemplated the graduate school that would guide me in my journey to effective teaching. Many of the descriptions of theory and practice that Biber detailed I saw firsthand when I encountered Elsbeth Pfeiffer supervising a teacher at Riverside Therapeutic Nursery while I was completing an undergraduate independent study. Through my observations of Elsbeth with special needs children and their teachers, I experienced the ways in which an advisor modeled how, as Biber wrote, “the teacher guides the children toward creating a network of relationships that bind the discrete elements of experiences” helping them to develop their own “sense of competence.” In addition, I was intrigued as I participated in debriefing conferences where theory was used to make sense of “perplexing classroom realities” and challenged when questions arose that did not match theories. In my view, Biber’s analyses of Bank Street’s work with children, families, and teachers affords the reader with the roots and wings of Bank Street’s educational perspective as she framed our broad institutional responsibility “for the development of the whole person—his affective and social as well as his intellectual development and our commitment to repeated cycles of innovate, observe, study evaluate, and revise” in order to use our “private, independent learning environments as laboratories for the development of optimal learning settings for children and adults and as a base for making an impact on the direction of public education.”

In the next two articles about teaching, Biber and Snyder investigated when it is possible to know a teacher is “good” and Lewis and Winsor evaluated a different way in which Bank Street supervised beginning teachers during the 1950’s baby boom when the need for teachers increased dramatically. In each of these articles the authors approached the education of teachers by considering teachers’ strengths and needs and the social context in which they were teaching. I have used these articles in a literacy coaching class to provide a historical view on teaching and teacher preparation. Biber and Snyder’s writing presented my class with ways to observe, analyze, and evaluate for themselves “when a teacher is good and what good teaching is” and how this relates to being a literacy coach. As they speculated about the ways to support colleagues with their coaching, they appreciated the articulation of teachers’ and children’s needs. The identification of knowledge, skills, and dispositions rang true for them. Most poignant to their own teaching practices was the description that a teacher “need[s] to be so secure within herself that she can function with principles rather than prescriptions, that she can exert authority without submission, that she can work

experimentally but not random...” These words affirmed the ways in which they had been supervised by their Bank Street advisors. Reading about the significance of the advisement process in Lewis and Winsor’s *Supervising the Beginning Teacher* linked them to a seminal teaching professional practice in a deep and thoughtful manner. Some of the literacy coaches in my class who were confronted with rigid school environments related to the idea that “with understanding supervision” they could be “helped to reorganize” their “values, rather than discard them.” They acknowledged that their advisors supported the group from “intoxication with difficulties,” by asking them to consider “How can you make the program (curriculum content) work for you as an organizing element in the classroom?” Lewis and Winsor’s article was pivotal in making the advisement processes more visible to these literacy coaches. It also served as a model for coaching that focused the teacher and coach on what was occurring for the children rather than teaching as a performance.

Whether as a nascent elementary special education teacher developing curriculum and or as a seasoned doctoral student analyzing other teachers’ integrated social studies curriculum, I relied on Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Charlotte Winsor’s foundational ideas about social studies. Mitchell’s *Social Studies and Geography* furnished me with important questions and insights related to the concepts of human geography. I investigated the ways in which trips promoted students’ understanding of the geography of the urban environment as they observed the interactions of people. In addition, Mitchell pondered how social studies could teach about the “other fellow” or the people who are not part of our natural group. Citing the influences of her time in the 1930’s, she questioned the power of the curriculum tools for studying relationships so “we shall understand the ‘other fellow.’” During my dissertation research Charlotte Winsor’s “Child Growth and Learning in Social Studies Experiences” served as a framework to examine integrated social studies practices in three elementary classrooms in a school where the “program [was] built on social experiences available to the school in its community and appropriate to the understanding of the child.” Winsor affirmed my observations of the importance of teachers being seen as curriculum makers when she asserted that “only as teachers develop awareness of and are excited by the broadening base of their responsibility will profound changes in school program be truly understood...”

The teachers in my study viewed their role in social studies curriculum development as active as they planned meaningful learning experiences based on their knowledge of child development so children would have the “social attitudes, relationship thinking, study skills, and creative expression” that would prepare them for “active participation in the adult society.”

As a young pre-kindergarten teacher I connected the importance of play in my own life as I watched children construct environments in the block area and reconstruct some of their life experiences in dramatic play. Unsure of my role, I instinctively observed carefully, asked clarifying questions, and waited to be invited into the play. Since these 2½-3 years olds were not very verbal, I learned how much their play could inform me about their inner and receptive language. While re-reading “*Play As a Growth Process*” in the current educational climate, I am challenged to use Bibber’s timeless text to support the efforts of early childhood educators to document the various ways that play is a natural tool for children as they learn about the world and seek an outlet for complex

and conflicting emotions. Most importantly, Biber employs the reader to question, “How much shall the teacher get involved in children’s play?” Then she inspired teachers to think about their roles in offering new ideas and materials into play, balancing stimulation and independence.

Since my early days of teaching and through my work as an advisor and professional developer, children’s language has delighted and fascinated me as I listened to the variety of ways in which children made sense of language. I have often asked “How do they learn to say their ideas in such unique ways? And what can I do to encourage this process?” Claudia Lewis’ “*Deep As a Giant – An Experiment in Children’s Language*” revealed the mystery of her kindergarteners’ language complexity as she led them through a systematic and playful investigation of language with metaphor. Through her inquisitive and accepting teaching style, she quickly discovered the multiplicity of ways her five and six year old students can use language in inventive and creative ways. Her article published in 1938 concretized for me the critical role that teachers can play when they observe, record, and encourage children’s language development in productive and clever ways.

Edna Shapiro’s “*Reassessing the Criteria of Competence in School*” explicated assorted and conflicting definitions of competence. Competence depicted as action, capacity, situational, and culturally defined. Analyzing data from two different studies that measured students’ performances, Shapiro concluded that the “concept of competence... is somewhat chameleon-like.” The meanings of competence depended on the context where it was measured. During our current educational time period when public school teachers are being assessed by students’ test scores the nature of competence in school has narrowed to a limited focus. Students are considered competent when measured by common core graded standardized testing. Teachers are considered competent when students perform well on common core graded standardized testing. These current factors emphasize Shapiro’s conclusion that we need a “much more sophisticated research strategy than any that has been used if we are to clarify and differentiate the criteria of competence in schools.”

The process of reviewing and responding to this collection of Bank Street Thinkers has enabled me to look back over my forty-year affiliation with the College and articulate the profound impact Bank Street has had on me throughout my studies and professional life. As a recent college graduate in 1975, I instinctively knew that Bank Street would be one of my educational homes. The content of these publications affirm this early decision to become a life long teacher. I hope you find your own connections during your reading process and in our discussions in the salon.