Bank Street and Teach for America: Process and Preparation

Paul Shirk

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The Independent Study Collection
Bank Street and Teach for America: Process and Preparation

by

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze the goals and practices of education that are implied in the mission statements and literature of Bank Street College of Education (Bank Street) and Teach for America (TFA). I noticed and struggled to understand the tension between the mission statements of the two organizations that I was a part of during my master's program. While analyzing the readings and my experiences, I began to see differences between these two organizations' theories and beliefs about child development. I considered how my experiences with children supported or refuted these beliefs. From Bank Street, I recognized many beliefs about child development that confirmed ideas and feelings that I have passionately considered in my own education and in my experience as a teacher. From TFA, I recognized beliefs about child development that have been sources of frustration. In summary, I've found that my experience at Bank Street has helped me to see education, like Dewey (1897) saw it, as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living."
Bank Street and Teach for America: Process and Preparation

Opening Statement

Question about Purpose of Education

What is the purpose of education in U.S. American society? We are a complex society with many ideas about education. Education is an enabler of social mobility - go to college and you will earn more than if you don’t. Education is a humanizing force – learn to love reading and writing and you will see more beauty in the world. Education is a catalyst of activism and social change – make sense of the world around you and you can be a leader in your community.

Although the values mentioned above may have some broad appeal, and might not seem mutually exclusive, I’ve experienced conflict about how to put these ideals into practice in elementary school classrooms. I will comment on this controversy through the lens of my involvement in two very different educational institutions: TFA and Bank Street. Specifically, I’ve found that TFA believes that education prepares children for life, whereas Bank Street believes that education involves kids in the process of living. The ways that these two organizations frame the purpose of education are evident in their mission statements.

Mission Statements and Organizational Approaches

TFA was founded by Wendy Kopp in 1990. Each year the organization recruits college graduates and prepares them to teach in the country’s most needy schools as part
of a two-year commitment to the Corps. TFA’s focus on equity is evident in its mission statement: “One day all children will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” (Kopp, 2001). In an attempt to compete with investment banks and law schools and thereby bring an aura of prestige and selectivity to the teaching profession, TFA intensely pursed top graduates at top schools (Kopp, 2001).

After graduation from undergraduate institutions, TFA corps members are trained at summer institutes where they team-teach in public schools in the morning and attend professional development workshops in the afternoons and evenings. The professional development focuses on literacy, classroom management and “investment” (TFA internal professional development materials as personal communication, 2006). Many corps members work past midnight to prepare lessons and materials for the following day throughout the five-week institute. Throughout their two years as part of the corps, teachers pursue certification and/or master’s degrees. They also receive mentoring support from a former teacher called a Program Director (PD) who is usually an alumnus of the corps. The PD visits the corps member’s classroom on roughly eight-week cycles and then meets to debrief about the instruction and classroom culture. Additionally, PDs collect and analyze student achievement data (standardized tests, teacher made quizzes, developmental reading assessments) through a battery of “mastery tracking” spreadsheets designed by TFA staff. The intensity of the push varies between individual PDs, but corps members generally feel that a central part of a PDs job is to motivate the corps member to pursue two years of growth in reading and 80% mastery of math standards. The emphasis is on closing the achievement gap between black and white, or rich and
poor, so that all children have an equal chance in life. Education is a thing to attain.

Education is a way to get ahead.

Bank Street was founded in 1916 by Lucy Sprague Mitchell. She belonged to a class of progressive Americans who saw great power in social science. In fact, Bank Street was originally known as the Bureau of Educational Research – focusing on building knowledge about development by observing children. Now the mission of Bank Street is the following:

improve the education of children and 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 College supports the entire spectrum of education, supporting Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s mission to ‘keep one ever a learner’ (“Mission Statement”, in About Bank Street section, n.d.).

Graduate students at Bank Street engage in mathematical thinking to learn how to teach math and they conduct research to learn how to teach social studies. They reflect consistently on their personal history in schools as students and on their current responsibilities as educators. Through this ongoing study, they form their pedagogical values. Learning is a process of forming relationships between ideas. A teacher observes
children closely, collecting and organizing qualitative data to assess and guide the child’s social and academic development.

Learners become active citizens of communities that are guided by common purposes and grow through conflict. Learning carries on outside of the classroom walls and shapes how a student lives her daily life.

**Narrative of how I was influenced by Bank Street and TFA**

Through my first four years in classrooms, I’ve become increasingly unsetttled by TFA’s silver bullet focus on college readiness as assessed by standardized tests. I’ve helped D’Angelo grow a year and half of reading proficiency in 1st grade and watched him fall a year over the summer. I’ve seen a class of 4th graders, heralded for their 100% passing rate on the 3rd grade ELA test sit passively with an awesome library of trade books about Native Americans for weeks without finding more than three or four facts. I’ve thought about how my own “first class” education has left me insufficiently prepared to be a leader, to develop effective plans, to solve problems. This focus on standardized achievement and college preparation removes me and my students from the world, it puts us on the sidelines, keeping score.

Meanwhile, at Bank Street, in glimpses of theory and practice, I’ve seen five-year olds laying the cognitive foundation of production and consumption by exploring corner stores and interviewing shopkeepers. I’ve seen seven-year olds create bar graphs to record data about the types of transportation that they observe on the street corner outside their downtown Brooklyn school. On a trip to the Hudson River Valley, they collected similar data from a rural community to compare to Brooklyn’s. I’ve seen one 10-year old
explain to another how and why they should devise a triple Venn diagram to categorize classroom objects and rattle off basic facts about multiples and factors with alarming fluency. I’ve seen 13-year olds cite Supreme Court precedents while arguing hypothetical civil rights cases and then work industriously for an hour to mold Athena erupting from Zeus’ head out of clay. This focus on connecting teaching and learning to the world, to the communities in which children live and interact, inspires me to be an exemplary learner with my kids.

**Thesis**

This body of experience, full of contrasts, leads me to reflect daily on the following question: What is education for? Why do we send children to school? What do we want them to learn? What do we want them to experience and live?

As I’ve stated them, Bank Street’s and TFA’s goals aren’t completely contradictory. Would anyone at Bank Street dare to argue that only some kids should have the opportunity to go to college and get competitive jobs? Would anyone at TFA argue that teaching and learning should not be connected to the world outside the classroom?

The disagreement, then, is not about the abstract concept of the goals of education. The disagreement is about how to plan concrete educational goals for children six, eight, ten-years old and so on, that will lead to the ultimate fulfillment of this idealized goal of education. There’s disagreement because TFA and Bank Street disagree about what children are capable of thinking and feeling. Specifically, TFA implies that children need to learn and master an expanding repertoire of discrete basic skills to
prepare for adulthood while Bank Street implies that children can make sense of their world by using these skills in expanding levels of sophistication and mastery at each stage of their development. The organizations have different understandings of child development. TFA believes children must be prepared for future living and that this preparation can occur in a context very different from what we call living. Bank Street believes that children must become active in a process of living and learning.

As a "student" of these organizations, I've been influenced by both views of child development. In order for me to continue my growth as an educator I need to clarify my understanding of child development so that I can bring the abstract ideals of education into my classroom for my children. In the following pages, I will analyze the concepts of child development that I've learned from Teach for America and Bank Street. I will comment on what works for me in my classroom, what I disagree with and what I am still figuring out.

**Literature Review**

**TFA – Teaching as Leadership**

Though TFA’s mission statement has a clear focus on student achievement, the professional development literature has an unwavering focus on the role and responsibilities of the teacher in the classroom. Therefore, in order to understand their view of child development, I will have to interpret from what they say about the role of the teacher.
TFA’s professional development centers on the paradigm of leadership. They assert that good teaching is similar to good leadership in any context. The teacher’s actions follow a cycle that mirrors the development of a business or project.

Teachers who are successful at closing the achievement gap do exactly what all great leaders do when they face seemingly insurmountable odds: they set big goals, invest their organization (students) in working hard to achieve these goals, plan purposefully, execute effectively, continuously increase their effectiveness, and work relentlessly toward their objective of closing the achievement gap for their students (Farr, 2010).

Every step of this cycle points toward results. A teacher must be accountable for closing the achievement gap.

**Big Goals.**

The job of setting goals does not receive much scrutiny. In TFA, goals are defined as a class average of achievement on standardized tests - often two years of growth in reading and 80% class average for mastery of math skills. TFA does little to define goals for learning in writing, social studies and science for elementary school teachers. Therefore, to summarize TFA’s literature I will focus on teacher actions about investment, planning, effectively executing lessons and working relentlessly to increase effectiveness.

**Investment.**

After setting goals and planning assessments, the exemplary teacher needs to motivate students. TFA’s language for motivation is “investment.” I will provide a
glimpse of an adult’s visit to a classroom where students are invested and then I will describe how TFA suggests that teachers can develop this kind of investment:

Even as we cross the door’s threshold, without the teacher or other students seeming to notice or care, a student pops up and escorts us to an observer’s table at the back of the room, opens a notebook, and in a whisper shows us the learning goals for the day. He then hustles back to his seat, his hands shooting up to contribute to the class discussion. Even before we have figured out what the lesson is about, we feel ourselves leaning forward with the students to hear the teacher’s hushed secrets....We notice that the giant 2s all over the wall are also on the cover of the notebook in our hand. We see a banner above the chalkboard. The banner explains that the 2s signify the two years’ worth of academic growth that students are committed to making in this classroom. We watch the students and notice that every time the teacher asks a question, every child holds up some kind of hand signal...the teacher praises the students’ efforts, and we wonder what is on the clipboard that she is frequently marking in her hand (Farr, 2010).

Motivated students are invested in what they do because they have a sense of I can and I want (Farr, 2010, p. 60). The teacher needs to help children believe that their intelligence is malleable so they will be confident that they can master challenging academic content. The teacher can do this by giving strategic and targeted praise that recognizes learning, effort and process rather than achievement alone; both within a lesson and over time (Farr, 2010, p. 61). Teachers develop a culture of achievement based on progress by consistently assessing students’ performance and sharing the results; so that progress is transparent and so that students take pride in this progress.
The teacher leader should also build personal relationships with students and their parents so that high expectations can be something shared and reinforced fluently at home and in school (Farr, 2010).

Next, the teacher needs to convince students of the value of that achievement. I was encouraged to teach students about the average income levels that correspond to different levels of academic achievement (dropout, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, post-graduate) in order to impress them with the importance of education. Relationships with family members and role models can also help build a sense of the worth of academic achievement.

**Plan Purposefully.**

TFA suggests a version of what is known as “backwards planning”. They assert that a good leader plans in a three step process: first envisioning the desired result, then stopping to “translate their image of success into some form of assessment,” and finally stepping back to plan the actions that will lead to this success.

**Goals.**

According to Teach for America, the fundamental quality of all exemplary teachers is to have clear goals. The classroom of a quality teacher “has a justifiably ambitious academic destination toward which all efforts can clearly point” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). Though “ambitious” goals are a priority, TFA also asserts that goals should be “feasible.” Goals are not just set and then met or forgotten. An exemplary teacher should be able to explain “the specific and prioritized skills that
students will need to master in order to reach the goal” (TFA, personal communication, 2006).

**Assessment.**

After goals are set, a teacher leader will identify appropriate assessments; the measures for progress and success. According to the Teaching as Leadership (TAL) rubric, the exemplary teacher:

creates or obtains diagnostics that provide detailed information about the extent of readiness of each student, formative assessments (as well as lesson assessments) that, when appropriate, scaffold questions to discern the extent of mastery of each learning goal taught, and summative assessments that measure mastery of each learning goal taught, including components requiring higher-order thinking. Assessments contain no questions unrelated to the learning goals taught (TFA, personal communication, 2006).

This description reveals the continuity of assessment that is a hallmark of backwards planning. Assessment is not just something done at the end of a unit of study, as many of us experienced growing up; rather it’s a constant undertaking by the teacher to gather information about the effectiveness of his teaching – its impact on student understanding. Additionally, the TFA PDs taught me that assessments should be valid, efficient, and reliable. An assessment is valid if its “form, language, or style does not give away answers,” and if “one idea at a time” is tested so that a teacher can be precise about what students do and don’t understand (Farr, 2010, p. 114). An assessment is reliable if it includes “multiple items to assess each learning goal” (Farr, 2010, p. 115). Finally,
assessments is efficient if it “(provides) insights worth the time it takes to administer” (Farr, 2010, p. 115).

Planning flows backwards from assessment. To write a long-term plan the exemplary teacher thinks about how concepts and skills should build on one another sequentially throughout the year. To write a unit plan the teacher makes a more specific sequence of skills based on information from diagnostic and formative assessments. A lesson plan should have an objective that is clear, bite-sized, and measurable. The teacher should think about the key points that will help students master the objective. “All components of the lesson align to the objective, to the key points, and to the way that students will be asked to demonstrate mastery” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). The lesson plan should build upon students’ background knowledge by including questions that elicit students to make connections and to refine their misunderstandings.

Finally, teachers make classroom and individualized behavior plans that include routines, rules and expectations, and logical consequences to create a classroom culture that is focused on achievement of each lesson’s academic objectives (TFA, personal communication, 2006).

**Execution**

TFA advocates for a specific lesson format that includes a one-two-three sequence of modeling, guided practice and independent practice. Modeling is when a teacher shows how to do a specific skill and thinks out loud about how to do that skill. Guided practice is when the teacher and students are doing the skill together. The teacher might ask strategic questions or refer kids to a visual that will remind them of the steps of
the skill or process. Independent practice is when students are working by themselves to do the skill that the teacher has just taught. I refer to this format in short hand as “I/We/You” because first “I” model the skill, then “we” practice it together then “you” (the students) practice independently.

The exemplary teacher should “clearly present academic content” through “explanations (that) are coherent, cohesive and correct and are conveyed in a focused, meaningful and memorable way that illuminates key ideas” (TFA, personal communication). The second big piece of “Executing Effectively” explains how a quality teacher “coordinates student academic practice...so that all students have the opportunity to gain mastery of the objective” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). The exemplary teacher “facilitates in ways that encourage students to self-monitor, cooperate and support one another” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). During the teacher’s time to model the skill, during guided practice and during independent practice, the teacher should ask questions that check for understanding (TFA, personal communication, 2006). These questions range from low-level thinking and choral response to thought provoking questions to elicit reflection or critical thinking.

Throughout the lesson, the exemplary teacher communicates high expectations for behavior, including well rehearsed, time-saving routines that keep the focus on learning and maintain a sense of urgency in the classroom (TFA, personal communication, 2006). Finally, and most importantly, the exemplary teacher “evaluates and keeps track of students’ performance” (TFA, personal communication, 2006) so that progress towards the goal is clear and any necessary adjustments for further instruction, including decisions about differentiation and remediation, can be made.
Bank Street – Development and Interaction

Bank Street’s mission statement focuses on growth and interaction. At Bank Street, I read many texts that describe how children think about their experiences in the world and how they think about themselves and their peers. Below I summarize and comment on a few of these.

**Emotional and Character Development.**

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) describes human development through what he calls the “eight stages of man.” The essence of humanity at each stage is described with a dichotomy that names *divergent* dispositions. For example, the first stage is subtitled “Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust” (Erikson, 1963). The growth and conflict described by each stage happens sequentially, but a person may begin a new stage without having fully assimilated prior developments. For example, many of us might struggle with the issue of basic mistrust, although this is the most primary stage of development. The child’s environment will impel her towards a balance or imbalance of these divergent dispositions.

**Basic Trust vs. Mistrust.**

In the first stage, a baby needs to form a trusting relationship with his environment and then with himself (Erikson, 1963). First, a baby needs to receive care that provides consistent, familiar conditions (p. 247). Objective conditions are things like routines, physical environment and schedules. Affective conditions are the feedback that caretakers and other people give the baby about her actions and words. If there is predictability to the baby’s objective and affective conditions, she will develop normal,
measured responses to inner and outer experiences (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1963) cautions that it is not just the pattern of care but also the quality of care that influences the baby’s development. The caretaker must “(combine) sensitive care of the baby’s individual needs and a firm sense of personal trustworthiness within the trusted framework of their culture’s life style” (p. 249) in order to help the baby build a strong identity, a feeling of being all right with oneself. Frustrations are natural as long as the way they are dealt with leads to an ever-increasing sense of belongingness (p. 250). Unsupportive conditions will lead the baby to feel that her individual and social life are meaningless.

**Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt.**

Erikson calls the next stage “Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt.” In this stage, young children began to explore their environment. They are no longer fully dependent; they can do some things for themselves. Erikson focuses his description of young children’s experiments in the dichotomy of “holding on and letting go” (1963, p. 251). The child should attain a balance of the two, “to hold can become a destructive and cruel retaining or restraining, and it can become a pattern of care: to have and to hold. To let go, too, can turn into an inimical letting loose of destructive forces, or it can become a relaxed ‘to let pass’ and ‘to let be’ ” (p. 251). Children should be guided to achieve the right balance of holding and letting go. Again, frustration is natural and beneficial to development. However, Erikson suggests that children should be guarded against “meaningless and arbitrary experiences of shame and of early doubt” (p. 252). In this stage a child should acquire a balance of self-control and self-esteem. If the child’s
experience of autonomy is not well guided he will develop too much self-control, becoming overly self-critical or overly analytical.

**Initiative vs. Guilt.**

In the third stage a child experiences “initiative and guilt.” Initiative is the energy that “adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning and attacking for the sake of being active” (p. 255). With initiative a child sets her own purposes. If she fails, she should have a disposition that allows her to move past her struggles and try again without being overly troubled. On the other hand, it is also possible that a child will develop a sense of guilt over the goals that she has set her eyes on. Ideally, this stage of growth should lead to a balance of “exuberance” and “self-control” (p. 256). In a state of equilibrium of initiative and guilt, a child will be inclined to work cooperatively with other children for the purpose of “constructing and planning” (p. 257).

**Industry vs. Inferiority.**

Next comes the stage of “industry and inferiority” in which the child “learns to win recognition by producing things” (p. 259). Children are interested in learning to use tools that they can use to work on tasks that can be completed. Most cultures have some form of systematic instruction through which children develop skill with tools. Competition is natural and healthy but can lead to “a sense of inadequacy and inferiority” (p. 260). Now the child is more greatly affected by culture and society. “Many a child’s development is disrupted when family life has failed to prepare him for school life, or when school life fails to sustain the promises of earlier stages” (p. 260). Furthermore, social life at the level of peer interactions is newly important. Productive activities that
sustain children's attention at this stage also involve them with peers whether working in parallel on similar tasks, cooperatively on a shared task, or nearby each other on different tasks. Erikson considers this dynamic to be the seed of the "division of labor and differential opportunity" in specialized societies. Therefore, children begin to see their skills as part of the technological ethos of their culture and they may compare themselves to others (p. 260).

*Adolescent and Adult Development.*

Concern for how others see them, of course, is at the center of the adolescent stage that is characterized by "identify and role confusion." A strong identity develops in this stage when the child's ordinary sense of himself matches with his "meaning for others" (p. 261). This "projection" of the self to see how it is reflected plays out in careers, love and group belongingness.

After the identity is developed, the young adult tries out her ability to merge that identity with others in strong relationships. A substantial fusion requires her to "abide by commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises" (p. 263). Furthermore, she must have the strength and integrity to give of herself without losing her self. The fear of this "ego loss" could lead her to develop unhealthy relationships or to avoid relationships altogether. If this fear can be overcome, the individual stands to gain in a relationship the mutual trust, work, and productivity that have sustained her own development.
The seventh stage, "generativity vs. stagnation," is another extension of the preceding. After a young adult fuses his identity with another he will want to produce and help develop the next generation, through procreation and work in service.

**Cognitive Development.**

Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist who organized research about child development in order to learn about how children think and learn. He took detailed, descriptive notes of his observations of children in both unstructured and experimental situations. The experiments he designed generally had two parts. First, he gave children concrete materials and problems to solve with them. Second, he observed their words and actions and interviewed them about their thinking process. After conducting many of these experiments with children of all ages, Piaget organized stages of development that describe the characteristics of thinking and learning in certain age ranges. There has been some debate in recent years about the quality of transitions between these stages, but the impact of the theory is widespread. Because Piaget's writings were dense and difficult for some to read, educator Ed Labinowicz (1980) has summarized them with graphic representations of the experiments that lead to the theory. Here I summarize Labinowicz's presentation of Piaget's ideas.

Piaget developed an interactionist theory, which states that thinking and learning occur through the interaction of mental frameworks and the environment (Labinowicz, 1980). In other words, children think about what's going on around them. This sounds pretty obvious, but Labinowicz (1980) points out that many adults hold the belief that children know nothing until an adult tells them (p. 57). In contrast to that belief, Piaget's
interactionist theory proposes that children have pre-existing mental frameworks - like beliefs, categories of objects, and expectations for cause and effect situations – that are constantly being reorganized based on new experiences with their environment (p. 34).

For example, Labinowicz describes a three-year-old who has met many cats in her neighborhood and has formed a category in her mind to describe cats (p. 29). Even though each cat may be a little different the three-year-old conceives of cats as small, furry animals with long tails that walk on four legs. When she sees a squirrel for the first time, she experiences what Piaget calls disequilibrium – her existing mental framework must be reorganized to effectively process the observation of a squirrel. Initially, she might focus on the similarities with a cat – small, furry, tail – and the category of cat may suffice (p. 29). Later, upon seeing the squirrel stand firmly on its hind legs, a stronger experience of disequilibrium might lead her to abandon the category of cat and begin to construct a new category for squirrel (p. 53).

Piaget would call her inclination to call the squirrel a cat assimilation (p. 37). That is, she is incorporating her perceptions, differences and all, into her existing framework. She resists changing the framework, so the squirrel falls in the same category as the cat. When she sees the squirrel stand up, she modifies her framework as a result of new input. Piaget calls this accommodation (p. 37). This example illustrates a neat, linear version of what could be a back and forth process. In this view of thinking and learning, a child’s errors are seen as steps to understanding. Thinking is a process of reorganizing mental structures to effectively deal with experience. If experience is the engine of learning, then teachers must do much more than just tell information. They must learn to organize experiences and strategies for processing experiences.
The preceding explanation of the interaction of mental frameworks and the environment is like an umbrella explaining thought processes in each of the four stages of cognitive development that Piaget identified. The growth from one stage to the next throughout youth describes an arc from nearly absolute dependence on physical reality as the object of thought to the ability to consider abstract relationships of physical and immaterial reality. During the first years of life, from birth through seven years of age, children are not yet able to think logically. Piaget calls these early stages of thinking sensorimotor and preoperational (p. 60). Evidence of thinking in these stages is found in the child’s growing range of movements and manipulation of physical objects. Physical movement helps children to represent action in their thoughts. Play allows children to represent and bend reality, a first step in problem solving.

Piaget found that children around seven years of age begin to have the ability to think logically about reality provided they can refer their thoughts to concrete experience. Thus, this third stage is called concrete operational (p. 70). Though Piaget asserted that children of this age can think logically, his observations show the inconsistency of this ability across different cognitive tasks. Children experience disequilibrium. Sometimes they will think logically, sometimes they struggle to.

The domains of thought deal with concrete materials. For example, children began to understand conservation (p. 73) as the principle that one fundamental characteristic (i.e. mass, volume, length) doesn’t change even though another characteristic does. For example, some children in this age struggle to grasp that a taller, skinnier glass of water does not contain more water but rather the same amount as a shorter, wider glass even if the two samples of water were shown to be of identical
volume. To understand this and similar examples of conservation, children must be able to hold two variables in their mind at once and realize a) that a change in one variable compensates for the other, b) that the identity of an object has not changed even if its appearance has and c) that many physical changes to an object can be undone.

Another emerging domain of thought in preoperational children is that of classification (p. 74). Like conservation, classification demands the ability to think about more than one characteristic of a physical object. For example, kids struggle to sort small objects by color, shape and size such that overlapping categories are consistent. A triangle can be yellow or orange, big or small and might be grouped with other yellow shapes, whether they are triangles or rectangles. Alternatively it could go with other big shapes, whether they are triangles or rectangles. But a small, yellow triangle should not go with a big, orange rectangle. During the age of concrete operations, most kids can master this kind of sorting activity, but “in the absence of concrete referents, Piaget found that 75 percent of nine-year-old Genevan children interviewed denied that they were both Genevan and Swiss” (p. 75). Like classification, ordering problems are difficult for kids if they do not involve concrete objects. A nine-year-old would struggle to answer logic problems like the following “If Edith has darker hair than Lily and Edith’s hair is lighter than Susan’s, which of the three girls has the darkest hair?” (p. 77).

**Progressive Organization of Subject Matter.**

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938) describes what he calls the progressive organization of subject matter. Its principal quality is connectedness. The content of student learning should start with a fundamental connection to a learner’s
experience and connect to future experiences. However, Dewey elaborates on the quality of this connection; conditions should be organized such that experiences lead to more experiences of “fuller and richer and also more organized form” (Dewey, 1938, p.73-74). Experiences should lead to or expose problems and make learners thirst for new ideas and information that could improve their “ways of judgment” for solving those problems (Dewey, 1938, p. 75).

Dewey reacts to the way of organizing subject matter in traditional schools that starts with the knowledge that has been useful in the past. This subject matter is outside of the experience of the learner. However, he argues that knowledge of history should not be ignored but that the present be “stretched” to include the past as a means of understanding present conditions (Dewey, 1938, p. 77).

In addition to seeing history as a means of understanding the present, Dewey asserts the need for young children to understand the scientific and technological functioning of everyday life. This echoes Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s assertion that children need to think in relationships to understand the means behind “hidden end products” (2001) that include everything from canned and packaged foods to electricity and gas to underground public transportation. Conditions should be arranged so that children will see the problems that are solved by technology. New experiences lead to more mature intellectual organization of means and consequences. One concrete example of experiences that lead to intellectual organization and understanding of the social world are work experiences for children in shops and kitchens.
The scientific method, Dewey argues, is the appropriate and necessary way to structure children’s learning experiences. Children’s ideas are natural hypotheses. The teacher’s job is to plan experiences that will inspire or uncover children’s hypotheses, followed by experiences that will help them test the efficacy of the hypotheses, and finally to encourage children to reflect on the progression of their thinking.

Dewey explains that growth of intellectual organization is not an end in and of itself but a means to applying understanding back to experience. The learner who examines her social world can apply her more mature ideas as “the means by which social relations may be understood and more intelligently ordered” (Dewey, 1938, p. 83).

**Discussion**

The literature review above presents the contrasting beliefs of Bank Street and TFA about children’s abilities and responsibilities as I have made sense of them. First I will analyze these beliefs to answer the questions of my thesis: What is education for? What do we want children to do in school? I argue that TFA conceives education as a preparation for future living whereas Bank Street sees education as a process of living. I’ve found that the latter concept works better for me. Whereas TFA’s vision hopes to import preparation to the real world after a certain stage of preparation is attained, Bank Street’s encourages growth within real contexts.

In order to respond to these questions I will need to reflect on the role of the teacher and the role of the children, in the classroom. I have divided my commentary into four sections: 1) a critique of how TFA deals with children’s social and emotional growth, 2) a critique of TFA deals with academic goals, 3) narratives of success in my
classroom drawing inspiration from Bank Street and 4) some analysis of how I’d like to grow in the next few years.

Teaching the Anti-Social Way in TFA

Social learning for me describes the process by which children learn about feelings and roles – their own and others’. Bank Street encouraged me to think about this process much more than TFA did. Bank Street’s mission statement describes connecting learning to the “outside world” and the need to “strengthen communities” as well as individuals (“Mission Statement”, in About Bank Street section, n.d.). TFA does not explicitly address this process in their mission statement or in their core professional development, so I’m left to interpret their beliefs.

I’m concerned that TFA’s goals for child development implicitly promote anti-social behavior in a few ways. First, the predominance of learning activities done by individuals rather than by groups limits kids’ opportunity for growth in the context of collaboration. Second, the over-urgent tone of the teacher that emerges from TFA’s professional development squeezes out the playfulness of a child’s world, asks kids to be emotionally one-dimensional and discourages conflict. On the other hand, Erikson describes conflict as an engine of growth.

In my understanding, TFA’s goals of education prioritize learning activities that are done individually, outside of the authentic social contexts in which information is created and shared or through which skills are developed and evolved. TFA asserts that “all components of a lesson align to the objective and to the way students will be asked to demonstrate mastery” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). Elsewhere, TFA advocates
for the “use of authentic assessments, when appropriate, to reveal true mastery (while balancing the need for efficiency)” (TFA, personal communication, 2006). However, in my experience it was the need for efficiency that won. In four years working alongside TFA alumni, including award-winning corps members, I’ve met only one alumna who had a strong understanding of the use of authentic assessments. The need for efficiency then, leaves us with old-fashioned pencil and paper tests that assess the individual’s ability to privately respond to relatively closed questions. Assessment is not a performance situated in a meaningful social context, as it is so much in the years after formal schooling. If the way that the material is taught must match closely the way it is assessed then it follows that education will be a dead dialogue, it cannot be a process of living. Returning to the classroom vignette described in the literature review on motivation, we see a teacher surveying children’s hand signals and marking mysterious judgments on a clipboard. These actions evoke a plant manager not a facilitator of growth and interaction. This reading implies that the student can learn to feel good about her abilities only through external validation from the teacher. These actions don’t build the kind of community that I want for my kids. Here motivation issues from the power of the teacher as a figure who is disproportionately accountable and responsible for students’ learning (Haberman, 1991), rather than from the nourishment of a community of thinkers and ideas.

In light of the lack of activities that are vitally engaging to kids (i.e. responsibilities, play, drama, block-building, discussion, connecting arts to other curricula, doing research, building timelines) it is unclear what will motivate students. TFA doesn’t say that these intrinsically motivating activities don’t have a place in the
classroom; however, it is easy to infer that from the assertion that “all components of the lesson align to the way that students will be asked to demonstrate mastery” (Farr, 2010, p. 115).

Moreover, I’ve found that the urgency that pervades the rhetoric about the goal-driven leader can lead one to wish kids were unnaturally stable and stale. TFA urges teachers to design procedures to minimize distractions from the academic goals. While I agree that helping kids focus of the lesson is one of the main roles a teacher should develop, in practice I’ve observed my TFA colleagues over-emphasize focus to the point where the child behind the focus is lost. For example, children in my school have to be silent in the hallways and during class-work like independent reading and writing workshop. At Bank Street, on the other hand, I’ve seen kids settle into their own comfortable places for independent reading and develop their own agendas such as reading to friends, asking each other questions and acting out text.

What is lost when a child can’t talk in hallway? If she were allowed to talk, she could reflect on the school day, make observations about the layout and decoration of the school, and make plans for activities with friends. What is lost if kids can’t talk during independent work? Reading becomes a solitary activity, and the pleasure of word play that seven-year olds adore is silenced.

Moreover I find myself remembering the conflicting emotions that Erikson describes in his eight stages and wanting to let kids experience these conflicts rather than control them. I’ve become more sensitive to students’ need to develop self-regulation. This year I have a student named Miguel whose erratic temperament I find perplexing. I
haven’t been able to generalize the antecedents to his storminess. At times I’ve ignored his moodiness and watched him warm up. At times I’ve invited him to take a break in a quiet place away from the group. When I’ve delivered this invitation without any frustration, in less than five minutes his posture usually betrays that he’s paying close attention to the lesson from his remote location and he’s welcomed back. At times I’ve pushed too hard to diagnose and “fix” kids’ mood swings. Re-reading Erikson keeps me be aware that moods are a natural part of life; that I should refrain from over-manipulating kids. Acting with this awareness, I am becoming a facilitator, making a space for kids to deal with frustration so they can experience belongingness and trust.

My understanding is that the routines that TFA would have me uphold do not include the opportunity for children to develop socially and emotionally. Yes, a classroom must be focused on academic learning, but the child’s world cannot be left completely outside. The charter school where I work (in values and character a TFA spin-off) has watched a small group of its parents turn in four short years from ardent supporters to frustrated detractors who ask at parent-teacher conferences, “Is there any time in the day for them to be kids? Can they show some personality?”

In conclusion, I find that my values are fully engaged when I reread Erikson and Piaget, whereas I am reminded of the drudgery of my own schooling when I reread TFA’s *Teaching and Leadership* (Farr, 2010). I find that Bank Street sees students as active participants in a process of learning. Moreover, my experience at Bank Street suggests that social learning and academic learning are closely linked. For this reason, I will analyze TFA’s approach to academics in the next section and continue my analysis of Bank Street’s approach to both social and academic learning in narratives below.
Academic Skills and Knowledge Without Content or Context

Above I evaluated what Teach for America’s over-control of academics implies for children’s social development and I suggested how Bank Street’s emphasis on social learning might better serve kids. Below I will comment more precisely on what my learning from these organizations implies for children’s cognitive development: what they learn and how they learn.

Bank Street encouraged me to think about children as young scientists (Gopnik, 1999) who use their knowledge to make and test hypotheses about phenomena. TFA encouraged me to focus on teaching as telling, and learning as mimicry of skills that are divorced from real content or context.

Curriculum – Standards without Context.

TFA doesn’t think rigorously about curriculum. They do encourage teachers to design standards-based diagnostic, formative and summative tests in a cycle of instruction that aims for student mastery of material, and just not “coverage” of material. However, the standards, as I understand them, are guidance - an outline of the curriculum learning expectations that should be presented. Bank Street suggests that a teacher’s responsibility is to put this outline in a context that connects standard information and skills to children’s experience. On the other hand, my experience in TFA and at Achievement First suggested to me that standards are a final product, ready to be delivered by the teacher and consumed by the student. Standards are taught and assessed as discrete skills that lack the content or context that would make them meaningful.
For example, during my first year at Achievement First I felt that my expected role as a teacher was to build lessons around workbook pages. The network had a curriculum team who delivered workbooks to teachers including pages and pages of identical math problems. I observed that teachers who had been at the school for a few years wrote lessons with modeling and guided practice to go with the workbook pages. For example, teachers gave workbook pages including bar graphs that require children to read data like the number of goals that five kids scored in a soccer season. Most of our kids had little experience with soccer and other phenomena that were represented in the graphs. They had even less experience with a full season of soccer games that would yield scoring tallies of 56 or more goals; such amounts were represented in the graphs. In these classes, kids’ exposure to math was lacking context. In other words, connectedness, the principal quality of learning for Dewey and Piaget is lacking in this environment.

There is a time and place for explicit instruction and repetitive practice. Gone is my illusion that all kids soak up standards-based academic content grounded only on their experiences. To learn how to “represent information in a bar graph” (in a way that will set her up to master the 3rd grade test), a kid is going to need to have some repetitive practice that asks her to work with many examples of graphs. To get many examples of graphs efficiently, a teacher might need to copy some workbook pages of problems that have data which has no relevance to the learners’ lived experience. Seven and eight-year olds enjoy this kind of practice, after they have been able to connect the skill to a familiar context. Once my kids make sense of the use of bar graphs, I’m comfortable assigning repetitive practice. Without a context that is meaningful to the student, data is not data.
It’s just randomly associated numbers, starved of the stuff that defines data – comparisons, trends, expectations, correlations, etc.

What are kids losing the opportunity to learn about when their study of data exposes them only to hypothetical soccer seasons? They could learn about their own physical growth. They could learn about waste management and conservation in the school. They could learn about nutrition. In a school where one of my Bank Street classmates teaches, I saw the notes that second graders had made while standing on a street corner in Downtown Brooklyn and another in Cold Spring, New York to describe the types of traffic they saw in urban and rural areas. They counted the number of bicycles, cars, buses, taxies, and trucks and represented them in a bar graph. Data helps these second graders make senses of themselves as urban dwellers in a state with diverse communities and lifestyles. It will also help make sense of human’s impact on our environment. Learning about data was part of a process of living, rather than a skill to prepare students for future living.

If I’ve dealt only with math it’s because TFA’s vision of standards leaves me even less prepared to help kids make sense of their world through literacy. Again, the skills of reading and writing are well laid-out in the standards. However, these skills can be delivered in a mechanical way. It is the teacher’s responsibility to help kids make meaning of the richness of emotions, ideas, conflicts, morals and themes. I simply haven’t heard my TFA peers and mentors talking about what books or authors are good for certain age levels, or what books deal with themes that the class should learn about. This silence is similar to the teaching of data with no context; reading ceases to be reading when kids are not making sense of their world through the themes and
Children are reading to prepare for future demands of life rather than reading to live their lives more fully.

What is lost when teachers aren’t thinking rigorously about reading as meaning making? Reading potentially opens doors to all types of content. Kids could read about spiders, dinosaurs, whales, whale watching, baseball, libraries and firemen and so on and so on. Perhaps therein lies the problem. TFA teachers aren’t talking about what kids should learn through books because they could learn almost anything. To not make choices though, is a pernicious choice. A school where teachers are not talking about books will become a place where students don’t understand themselves and the world around them.

**How to Teach.**

Now I will turn from thinking about the context needed for kids to make sense of teachings to analyzing how TFA suggests teachers should teach. TFA’s model of a lesson reflects their emphasis on education as preparation for future living rather than a process of meaning making. I find that it is most effective for me to plan a balance of lessons structured as TFA suggests and lessons with a more flexible structure that is responsive to students needs.

As was previously discussed, TFA advocates for a specific lesson format that includes a one-two-three sequence of modeling, guided practice and independent practice. This lesson format describes a trajectory of decreasing scaffolding and increasing independence. Writ large, I think this is a good paradigm for learning.
However, when a teacher relies on this structure each day for the majority of his lessons, I think it becomes ineffective.

When I teach a lesson in this format, I often feel that I’ve done the thinking for the kids. I feel like it deprives kids of the “aha” moment that every learner should savor when struggle yields to clarity. For example, an I/We/You lesson about counting by twos, - as I’ve heard my TFA peers discuss it - just involves mimicking the teacher’s sing-song “2, 4, 6, 8…” Guided practice and independent practice then would be mimicry and it might be said that the student has mastered counting by 2’s. This is very mechanical and depends on memory.

However, when that same student is given a problem like this – “there are 18 cupcakes and nine students in the classroom. How many could each student get?” – he will probably be stuck because his teacher has not taught an I/We/You lesson on how to parse out a total into groups. Now, if his teacher had taught counting by twos by planning many experiences where the context and materials support the development of counting by 2’s then the student in this teacher’s class might struggle, have an “aha” moment and remember how to count by twos (and threes and sixes and nines) because he thought in relationships, using what he knows about math to solve a novel problem.

In conclusion, when I rely on the I/We/You format of teaching, to the exclusion of other structures, I find that I do the thinking for my kids. I feel like I’m implying that they shouldn’t think but need only to emulate my thinking. Emulation is a natural and useful method of learning. For example, emulation works well when lessons are focused on apprenticeship with a task or reaching an “aha” moment (more on this below).
However, as I’ve already shown, TFA suggests that lessons should mirror standardized tests, in which case the contexts are artificial, the thinking is artificial, and the emulation becomes lifeless and unthinking.

**Bank Street – Development and Interaction**

I’ve found that TFA’s pedagogy tends to deprive kids of what I think of as an “aha” moment, because it is supposed to mirror standardized assessments that lack meaningful context. I turn now to the theory I’ve learned at Bank Street which prioritizes the personal and emergent quality of learning. First, the type of “aha” moment when confusion yields to clarity is encouraged by Piaget’s interactionist theory of learning. It describes how the child reorganizes mental frameworks as she interacts with the environment through experience and reflection. Second, Erikson encourages the “aha” moment that comes from completing a task as a child “(w)ins) recognition by producing things” (Erikson, 1963, p. 259). Finally, Dewey encourages an “aha” moment when children, facilitated by curriculum that connects to their experience, start to pose problems themselves. Linking these three types of “aha” moments is Piaget’s theory that young children’s logical thinking is supported by concrete experience.

While employing some personal experience to evaluate and interpret beliefs, my discussion above has stuck mostly to logical analysis. However, because the quality of my learning is also dynamic and emergent, I will include descriptions below that employ narrative structure. My hope is that this format will help to communicate how the beliefs I’ve cultivated at Bank Street are beginning to play out in my classroom experience. In the commentary that follows, I will focus on the qualities of interaction in great moments
of learning that point towards the classroom community that I want to build in years to come.

**Reworking Mental Frameworks**

Piaget has influenced me to pay attention to how kids think and to what they already know. I will portray below how I can motivate my kids to learn about a complex topic because I support them to rework their mental frameworks rather than imagining I could supplant them with new knowledge.

For example, after reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X, I was dismayed and angry that Malcolm’s voice was censored in my own K-16 education. I wanted to let my kids hear his voice. In hindsight, I didn’t know enough about what prior knowledge or interest my seven-year old U.S. African-American and Caribbean African-American students already had about Malcolm. However, rather than hoping to plant certain understandings in their heads, I was motivated to share information and help them figure out how it fit into their existing frameworks. Moreover, I was sharing something that had recently caused me to challenge and develop my own thinking. Therefore, I was sincerely modeling the way a learner makes sense of the world.

We started by making a list of the things they thought they knew, and of things they wanted to learn. They seemed more familiar with Malcolm than I had expected. Moreover, though they thought they knew that he had been in prison, they didn’t seem to judge him. In fact, they seemed intrigued that someone famous, i.e. someone we are proud of, would also be someone who did something “bad” to go to prison:
We think we know that he was in prison -> What did he do to get sent to prison?

Was Malcolm X a criminal?

Why did he do what he did to get sent to prison?

I thought of Labinowicz' illustration of a three year-old experiencing disequilibrium when figuring out whether to assimilate a squirrel into her extant category for cats or to accommodate the differences between squirrels and cats by forming a new category.

Similarly, it seems like my kids didn’t have a category for controversial to describe a figure who was good and bad, leader and criminal, nor a category for profound life changes, to describe how someone like Malcolm could be virtuous in one part of his life after doing illegal things earlier in his life. Finally, the juxtaposition of the knowledge that he spent time in prison with the question, “Was Malcolm X a criminal?” seems to have the seeds of the idea that our judicial system is not always fair, that someone who is not a criminal could get sent to prison. Of course Malcolm had actually committed a crime, but I took the opportunity to encourage their disequilibrium a bit by remarking, “Well, you know that Martin Luther King Jr. was in prison, right? Was he a criminal?” They were shocked and confused and I smiled, knowing that they were reworking their categories.

If I had explained things to them right then and there, or planned a stricter agenda to what I wanted them to get out of reading Malcolm X, I might have discouraged their thinking. Instead, because I encouraged them to be comfortable with confusion, their curiosity was heightened and they read actively. In the second chapter, the author depicts
a scene in which Malcolm and his family stand outside their home as it burns to the ground and the police stand by, doing nothing to help. At least two of my kids sprang out of their seats, pointing like bloodhounds at the chart of their questions on the wall. I was pleased to see them reading so actively. Often seven-year-olds, and adults for that matter, read without thinking. These kids’ thinking was obvious. I sensed however, that they might not have the words ready to express their learning, and I didn’t want to kill the enthusiasm in the moment, so I provided the words. “Oh, so you noticed that the police aren’t taking care of Malcolm like they’re supposed to and you’re remembering your question about why he did whatever he did to get sent to jail. If the police didn’t take care of Malcolm then he might not feel like he should respect the police and the law later on, right?” They nodded and I thought that I’d struck the right balance of openness and direction. They had used their own questions to guide their reading and were actively reworking their existing knowledge.

Tasks

Another “aha” moment that involves kids in the process of living comes when kids are engaged in tasks. Kids are interested in producing things because they feel a sense of autonomy and industry – I can do things for myself (Erikson, 1963). Moreover, when they’re involved in tasks, children feel a sense of connection with a community via expectations for the performance of the task. As a learner, I’ve experienced tasks as activities and projects that connect as much to my background knowledge and experience as they do to the “adult-imposed” content of schooling. This familiar quality of an experience means the learner has an internal sense of motivation and feedback, desire to do good work and awareness of what good work is.
Though Erikson writes that most cultures have some form of systematic instruction through which children develop skills to accomplish tasks, my experience of schooling does not fit that description. The majority of my experience teaching and learning has involved multiple-choice tests, end of the chapter questions and vague discussions - not the type of “task”-like activities that facilitate an internal sense of motivation and feedback. Inspired by Erikson’s concept of industry, by Howard Gardner’s (1991) writing about the apprenticeship model of teaching and learning, and by David Perkins’ (2010) writing about teaching “junior-sized” versions of real “games”, I’m looking forward to giving my students more opportunity to engage in tasks for which they will have a sense of progress and completion.

One example is storytelling. One day we were reading a short Aesop’s fable, “Belling the Cat.” We read it twice chorally and they read it twice with their partners. Then we all turned the page over, opened our notebooks and wrote the story from memory. After writing, each student read her partner’s story and gave feedback, describing to a partner what she had done well and what she could improve. Their motivation was palpable as they hovered over their notebooks, smiles on their faces, pencils moving feverishly. They were motivated by the challenge of internalizing and reproducing the story structure. I created a sense of openness where they were encouraged to use specific language from the text that they liked, yet they were free to paraphrase if they needed to or if they found their own words that they preferred. I responded with a genuine, awed look on my face and simple words of approval when a student chose original words and gave the same intensity of praise to kids who stuck very close to the original. Moreover, there was no judgment of the few kids who got stuck and
couldn't finish retelling the story. I encouraged them to share what they had done, listen to their partner and try again tomorrow. I had created a sense of openness - a process in which we were able to interact. I could listen to what they knew and they could listen to each other. Each student could make different choices than the student next to him and both could be right. They knew what success looked like but were not intimidated by failing.

Like storytelling, sharing expertise (or information) is an example of a task which young children already have some experience of and which they will continue to practice throughout their lives in social, academic and professional contexts. The following case study describes my first experience asking kids to share their expertise. The way I let the interaction with my students develop illustrates a classroom as a community of ideas with the children taking responsibility along with the teacher for picking the information to be shared and even for initiating interactions.

I started this year by inviting my kids to share expertise. “Write everything you know about something you’re an expert on,” I said. The range of their topics was exciting: soccer, swimming, basketball, cooking, drawing, celebrities and an older brother. From the list of topics alone, I was already starting the year with more information about my students’ interests than I had in the past. By giving them a space to share their expertise, I set a foundation of respect for their knowledge and ability to think. Moreover, sharing what you know about something (though text-heavy in this case) is a task that students already have a sense of through social contexts, and it is something they will be called upon to do in many contexts throughout their lives.
Because I respected the students' internal sense of what it means to share expertise, I was also able to push them forward to greater sophistication. At first none of the students wrote more than five sentences. Some wrote as little as three. In the past I had been so self-critical, and by extension had such high expectations for my students, that I would have been dismayed by these skinny statements of expertise. I would have either scrapped the project or anxiously taught my kids the next day about how to add more detail to their writing. However, I used the same encouraging, wondrous tone that I had when responding to my kids' fables the previous year. "Wow, I'm so excited to see all that you know about soccer. After we work on this a little more, you're going to be able to teach your friends a lot about soccer." That night I wrote an equally paltry expository text about Miles Davis. I shared it with my kids the next day and patted myself on the back for my expertise the same way I had encouraged them, "I'm proud of what I know about Miles Davis and I'd like to be able to share some more. I'm going to think about the big pieces of information that I'd like to be able to explain about Miles." That day I wrote out three section headings -- "His Life", "His Bands", "His Records" -- at the top of three separate pieces of paper and my kids did the same with their own topics. I taught them the words topic and section heading but encouraged them to use whatever words they could to describe the organization of their ideas and information. The section headings pushed us to add more detail to our writing the following day but I was open to the possibility that they might not be able to add much new information. Therefore, I also taught them how to pose questions that would help them find the information that they were interested in learning. I brought each of them texts about their area of expertise, now "research project", from the library and taught them how to read to
find the specific information that they were looking for. Finally I taught them how to paraphrase the information they found to add detail to their expertise piece. Because I was consistently enthusiastic about what they knew and the new information they found, even if it was incomplete or vague, they developed a positive disposition towards the task of searching for factual information that they didn’t have when they started 2nd grade. I would have been challenged to respond to my kids so well if I’d already planned a sequence of aim driven I/We/You lessons. Though my goals for this task were open and subjective, the kids’ success was confirmed not only in my informal observation of their sustained enthusiasm but also by their class average of 85% on the first interim assessment of the year (a standardized test based on 2nd and 3rd grade New York State reading standards).

**Problem Posing and Progressive Organization of Subject Matter**

I’m interested in helping my students have the sort of “aha” moment when they pose problems. By “posing problems”, I don’t mean that they are pointing out controversy or tension or problems as something negative. Rather, I mean that children are actively processing their experience and inserting themselves into situations to involve themselves with the world. This is the same way that an artist talks about solving a problem with color or a musician with rhythm. It’s possible for young children to pose problems in this way when their experience is valued and built upon in the curriculum.

Though I will comment more below on some confusion I have regarding Dewey’s (1938) explanation of the nature of experience, I have had some success organizing experiences that lead kids to pose problems. The case I present here is an extension of
the “expertise sharing” task that I’ve described above. I’m proud of the way my students and I thought in relationships about our shared experiences so that we could organize them for more connectedness and sophistication.

I gave action to my kids’ ideas by sharing information in my text about Miles that I was genuinely passionate about and by responding to their interest in what I shared. For example, the second day that I wrote about Miles, I put one of his songs on during snack time, announced it to the kids and wrote, “Now Playing: Miles Davis, ‘Round About Midnight’” on the white board. The next day I said, “Should we have some more music today?” One of my kids responded, “Yeah, can we listen to Wayne Shorter,” while another said, “How about Charlie Parker?” They were connecting our snack time listening session with the text that I was writing as the model “expertise text.” That day I had written the section “His Bands” about some of the musicians Miles performed with, including of course Wayne Shorter and Charlie Parker.

Seven-year olds clamoring to hear my favorite jazz musicians confirms that I’m developing instincts for how to use the interactionist theory of learning to encourage kids to pose problems. If I had said, “Yesterday we heard Miles Davis and today I wrote about his band mate Wayne Shorter so we’ll listen to him today,” all would not have been lost, but I think I gained more by saying “Should we have some more music today?” This left it open. It created an interaction by facilitating their thinking. They assessed the value of our listening sessions and used new information to make decisions about how to carry the routine forward. They saw the situation as a problem, a space for them to assert themselves.
Concrete to Abstract

Second-graders rely on concrete experience to think logically. Again and again my advisor at Bank Street has told me, "They need to start with what's concrete." Inviting children to think about concrete experience will support them to have more “aha” moments. I’m still figuring out what concrete and abstract mean, because they are certainly not binary. All thought and symbols are somewhat abstract. I’m still figuring out what the progression from concrete to abstract feels like for much of the academic content that I’m supposed to teach. However, my experience to this point has helped me to clarify why I think it is useful to design concrete learning experiences. Below I describe the way I organize four benefits: motivation, suitability, retention and rigor.

Motivation.

I’ve noticed that my kids seem more motivated when learning experiences or tasks refer to concrete objects. For example, my kids produced their most spirited original writing last year when I invited them to copy or imitate one of the stories in Vera B. Williams’ (1996) collection More, More, More Said the Baby. This book is about the things that babies love to do with their parents. The stories are carried by the pictures and the text is short, simple sentences like captions. There was a class set of the book, so each student had a concrete example of what the product should look like. The assignment couldn’t have been more concrete. This made them feel confident, but rather than relax into the role of imitation, they pushed themselves. They referred to the text consistently but also started adding more detail than the book has, drawing of course from their vast fund of babyhood experiences that they are holding so dear still at seven years-old.
Suitability.

I've also learned that some tasks are suitable or appropriate only when kids’ thinking can refer to something concrete. I'm thinking about Piaget's finding that 75% of nine-year-old Genevan students that he interviewed denied that they were both Genevan and Swiss. I think we expect kids to understand more about the abstract world than they are really capable of. I think teachers are being disrespectful to kids when they fail to understand how difficult some tasks are for kids without a concrete referent.

Unfortunately, I've often heard colleagues snidely wonder at what first and second graders don't understand. I've heard teachers at both schools that I've worked at recount how every year second graders tell them that, "Martin Luther King Jr. married Harriet Tubman and freed the slaves." It would seem to be an urban legend used by teachers to describe their frustration with young kids’ ability to understand chronology and historical depth. However, it's completely reasonable that someone whose ability to think depends on concrete experience would struggle to use their seven years of training “experiencing” time to effectively understand 150 years of history.

This year, while making the list of questions about Malcom X, one of my kids asked, "Did Martin Luther King and Malcom X have slave owners?" This seemed like a perfectly reasonable question to all of the students so I wrote it down with enthusiasm. The next day I referred the students back to the question, acknowledged that it's hard for young kids to understand and remember how long ago different things happened and suggested that we make a timeline to show important events in American history. I explained that time is really a measurement of how we see the sun move, but that we could use length to measure time also, hence time line. I set up four large pieces of
poster paper with 1” lines horizontally on the wall. I put 2010 on the far right and then involved the students to figure out the right scale to use:

“If we make one line equal one year, how many years do you think we will be able to fit up here? Well, let’s count? 80. Ok. Hmmm, wait, how many years do we need to put up here? It’s up to us, isn’t it? Well, since we’re studying American-Africans right now, I want you to be able to see when Africans first came to America. I know off the top of my head that that happened about 400 years ago. So, we’re going to need to use a bigger scale than one line equals one year. We were counting by one, what else could we count by?”

Eventually we arrived at a scale of three lines equals one decade that allowed us to fit 1560-2010 almost perfectly on our four-poster spread. We started by adding the birth year common to the group and continued by adding dates of events that they were already aware of. They added the “I Have a Dream” speech, MLK’s and Malcom’s assassinations, Ruby Bridges’ and Michael Jackson’s birthdays, but no one volunteered “the end of slavery.” I pointed back to our question, “Did MLK and Malcom have slave owners?” and asked, “What do we need to put up here to answer that question?” Most weren’t sure. Finally Athena said, “The civil war?” I helped by saying, “Yes, the end of the civil war and the end of slavery happened at the same time. That was in 1865. Is 1865 before or after Malcom’s and MLK’s lives on the timeline?” I still see that chronology is very difficult for young kids to understand but using the timeline is a strong support for my kids’ understanding. Each day my kids clamored to put more dates on the timeline and I often overheard them refer to it in their own conversations with kids. With concrete support, kids are able to think logically about ideas that are abstract
to their own experience, such as ordering historical events far removed from their own lives. Additionally, by helping kids make a timeline of history that connects to their experience as Black individuals, without a grand narrative in mind, I’m validating their experience.

Retention.

I’ve noticed how concrete supports for thinking act as an anchor that help kids retain understanding or information. For example, I used the piece that I was writing about Miles to teach my kids about the way paragraphs and section headings can be used to organize related information. In addition to reading my writing, they listened to the music of the artists that were described in the second heading ‘His Bands.’ The experience created by the connection of the text to the music was vibrant and memorable. I referred back to this example countless times at the beginning of the year to remind them of the use of paragraphs and section headings to organize information. Instead of saying drolly, “Remember that section headings organize similar pieces of information, I found myself saying excitedly, “Remember how I grouped the pieces of information about Charlie Parker, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock all in the same section about people that Miles played with. And I gave it a heading, “His Bands”? Well, what are the pieces of information in this section you’re reading about?” This explanation might seem redundant or painfully obvious to an adult reader; I certainly would have thought as much a few years ago. Experience has taught me, however, that seven year-olds will see what adults experiences as coherent organization of information as perfectly arbitrary until they have a concrete experience that shows the use of such organization. Because the names of the musicians Miles played with connected to a memorable, concrete example
of organization, these names served throughout this year as buzzwords that triggered my kids’ understanding that written information should be organized in coherent, not arbitrary ways.

**Rigor.**

A concrete experience can extend a child’s thinking beyond his ability to think logically with pencil and paper. For example, one time I brought two boxes of crackers to share with my class. Before serving, I thought out loud with them, “If a serving size is 4 crackers and there are 22 of us, how many crackers will we be eating altogether?” Though multiplication and division are not second grade math standards, we counted them out onto the desks and they wrote number sentences to calculate the total that we had served. There were many different ways of representing this throughout the class:

- 4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4+4
- 16+16+16+16+16+8
- 32+32+16+8
- 20+20+20+20+20+10-4-4-4-4-4-2
- 4X4 + 4X4 + 4X4 + 4X4 + 4X4 + 4X2
- 22X4

The first sentence concretely shows the 4 crackers on each student’s desk. (b) shows the number of crackers among a group of four kids whose desks formed a table. (c) evolved from (b) as a way to simplify the calculation. (d) is awkward but shows some thinking
about how groups of five can be easier to work with than groups of four, so the child “assumed” groups of five and then subtracted to correct. Some of the kids even used a few of these strategies in combination, for example, one student wrote out (f) right away and then used (c) to solve it. Others used (b) and (c) together.

The students’ work was far more rigorous than it would have been if I had said, “Today I’m going to teach you how to do repeated addition,” or even “Today I’m going to teach you how to multiply” and then given them a page of abstract problems to practice. The concrete tools (crackers, desks, groups of desks) gave them support to think through a problem that would have been too complex if it were just paper and pencil. Moreover, the concrete tools forced connections between related concepts, not only the relationship of repeated addition to multiplication but also the messy relationship of groups of fours to the base 10 system. Math is full of potential concrete referents that will force thinking in relationships and encourage a kid to think through problems in her own way.

Reading is inherently more abstract than math (Cohen, 1988) but there are still ways to open up kids to more rigorous thinking by providing concrete referents. For example, a good reader will interpret what he reads by constantly connecting ideas on the page to ideas that are just in his head. Though one could argue that interpretation is too abstract for young kids, I’ve found that dramatization can make the use of interpretation more concrete.

This fall we were reading “The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin” by Beatrix Potter (1903). The main character Squirrel Nutkin waifs about, bothering old Mr. Owl, while his
brethren spend their day gathering food. The basic understanding of the story is that Squirrel Nutkin is lazy and bothersome and learns his lesson at the end of the story. However, a deeper reading would ask, “Are Squirrel Nutkin’s brothers and sisters angry that they’re doing all the work while he’s fooling around, or do they appreciate him as a “clown?” A simple problem of interpretation; the author provided no commentary on the question, but a far richer reading experience is had when we stop to contemplate issues like this. Now, getting seven year-olds to think about a question that is not on the page is abstract. I invited my students to act out one scene in which Nutkin bounds along in front of the group singing and joking as the rest carry the heavy load of the day’s food. We talked some about the choices that actors can make with how to use their faces and their voices. Most of the students playing the hardworking squirrels scowled with resentment at the actor playing Nutkin, but one of them started laughing with glee. It was an “aha” moment. My kids’ faces lit up with the recognition that things could go either way; that the reader is free to interpret the character’s emotions.

Again, this “aha” might seem painfully obvious but it’s extremely valuable. In fact, simplicity is key to the success. When young kids have a simple, concrete referent they can successfully undertake a potentially abstract thinking process.

What I’m still figuring out

Above I have summarized what I’ve learned from Bank Street and TFA and analyzed how it works for me. I’ve found that TFA’s emphasis on preparing kids for the future demands of life disrespects the needs of childhood while Bank Street’s emphasis on interaction respects the everyday process of living as a rich site for learning. While
critiquing TFA’s vision I briefly presented some alternatives. Then I presented narratives to describe some initial success that I’ve had putting these values into practice. However, the teacher’s role in Bank Street’s vision is complex and I’m still figuring it out. Below, I present reasons why I find it challenging to organize the process of living for kids to learn meaningfully about their world. I put forth specific questions about the structure of the progressive organization of subject matter. These questions depict the gap between my understanding of theory and practice that I would like to bridge in the next few years so I can direct my classrooms as a process of living. Second, I analyze why I’ve struggled to perform some of my classroom management responsibilities and describe what I’ve learned that I would like to apply to my practice moving forward. These are the two biggest areas of growth that I’ve identified for myself in order to put into practice the goals of education that I value.

**Progressive Organization of Subject Matter**

**Beginnings.**

While I value Dewey’s suggestion that the content of student learning should start with a connection to a learner’s experience, it’s difficult to put into practice with my second graders. According to the New York state social studies standards, kindergartners should learn about themselves, their families, their school and their neighborhood and first graders should learn about family history, how communities change, locating places in the community and basics of economic and political decision making in first grade. Second graders should learn about how people depend upon and change the environment, the challenge of meeting needs and wants, using human and
natural resources, and more about economic and political decision making.

Unfortunately, the teachers at my school have not adhered to these standards; therefore I have to mix kindergarten, first and second grade standards for my second graders. This makes it difficult to figure out where to begin, what experiences to connect to.

I started this year by helping my kids brainstorm things that families in an urban community need. They seemed very aware of their needs, making a long list. I felt like I was just confirming things they already knew, but not the to make sense of anything new. So, I looked for the connection between how we meet our needs and the geography of our community. However, I knew that my kids would need to make maps of things that are most immediate. Before trying to make maps of the community to show how our needs are met, we started making maps of the classroom and maps of the block. The kids map of the block have not been very accurate, so I think we will need to focus by taking time to draw things on our block. Now, I feel like we’re behind the standards a bit because we should soon be moving on from studying needs to how a culture allocates resources to meet needs and then to political decision-making. I’ve struggled to find out where to begin with my kids; first because I was just confirming what they already know and next by challenging them perhaps a bit too much, thereby losing some time with respect to other standards, because I didn’t anticipate their lack of experience with map-making. In the future I hope to develop better ways of figuring out what context and experiences my kids will need to best leverage what the know to learn new things.
Connections.

I’ve also found it difficult to make connections between experiences and texts because it’s hard to find non-fiction literature for my first and second-graders that fits their cognitive abilities. Texts that are full of information that answer students’ questions are often difficult for K-2 students to process because of the sentence complexity, vocabulary and detail. On the other hand, texts that the kids can access with their reading skills often confirm their existing knowledge but don’t push them to gain new information. Even my most enthusiastic students lose motivation for research when the texts are not at the right level of detail for their reading skills and background knowledge.

In addition to searching for books that balance accessibility and depth, I struggle to plan the experiences that connect to personal experiences without losing a coherent thread and without losing focus on the standards as they are assessed. For example, I am currently planning a unit of study for second grade social studies on geographic classification. The main standard that I’m supposed to address reads, “Geography requires the development and application of the skills of asking and answering geographic questions; analyzing theories of geography; and acquiring, organizing, and analyzing geographic information.” Kindergarten and first grade geography focus on maps and directions around the school building, the block and the community. According to the New York state social studies standards the topic for second-grade is cities. However, the 4th grade NAEP test already asks students to be able to read international climate, population, topographical and political maps. This is a big jump in two years. Therefore, I planned to make this second grade unit focus on some international maps to which kids have a personal connection. I thought of studying maps
that show patterns of immigration for the parents of our school community. These maps should be connected to the study of reasons why people immigrated and how people define a good home. These last two points are obviously connected to history and anthropology as much as they are connected to geography. While there is a trend towards interdisciplinary scholarship in higher education and research, I’m not sure if this study reflects that appropriately for elementary education. Does progressive organization lead me to stretch too far from the standard of geographic classification? It’s my responsibility to organize these connections to focus on what’s most important for second-graders to learn. In the future I hope to develop better ways of balancing the breadth of curriculum demands with the appropriate depth of understanding that will help second graders meet social studies standards and make sense of the world.

Understanding.

What level of detail can we expect second graders to know about the social studies? What has a seven year-old student learned from a trip to the corner store? He learns that a corner store is a place for people who live or work in the community to buy simple snacks and cleaning products. He learns that the customers pay money for these items. (Does he also learn about where the customers get this money?) He learns that the products didn’t originate in the store but were brought there from a factory and or a farm. (Does he also learn about how the food is grown on the farm and packaged in the factory? Does he also learn about the ingredients in the more synthetic products made in the factory?) He should learn about the transportation used to distribute the goods from factory to store. He should also learn about the energy used to power the vehicles that
transport the goods. (Does he also learn about where oil comes from and the impact of emissions of gasoline?)

The questions could go in so many directions. On the one hand this affirms the value of Dewey’s notion of continuity, on the other hand, the scope of study could get out of control. While at the corner store, the topic of study could turn from needs and consumption to human-environment interaction (resources or pollution.) The purposes of an inquiry-based classroom could suffer if the students’ research is not more focused than this. The teacher must help students stay open to asking questions but to take one topic at a time. It’s a teacher’s responsibility to use the standards to build a rough plan for social studies instruction, and to master the art of asking open-ended questions so kids’ interests are validated and prior experiences are built upon; however, the teach must also direct kids’ focus to a manageable piece of research.

**Big Ideas.**

As I’m stretching my brain here to think of how to connect content and learning activities to kids’ experiences, I feel like I’m losing sight of the big ideas or generative themes that will open the kids’ minds to future learning and give action to their ideas. The following excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Freire, 1970) leads me to start with a focus on big ideas:

An epoch is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude. The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people’s full humanization,
constitute the themes of that epoch. These themes imply others which are opposing or even antithetical; they also indicate tasks to be carried out and fulfilled. Thus, historical themes are never isolated, independent, disconnected, or static; they are always interacting dialectically with their opposites (p. 101).

One dialectical interaction of opposites that I might prioritize is the sources of students’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their community. This concept is a generative theme that is the glue that holds together a wide swath of human experience. It describes the provision of material needs and wants, though it also obtains in abstraction to thoughts and emotions.

How can this theme be phrased as a goal for my fourth graders? What will students do? What are the experiences that will improve students’ “ways of judgment” (Dewey, 1938) for increasing satisfaction and minimizing dissatisfaction? I imagine three levels of experience and understanding: 1) students state facts about how their needs are met or not met, 2) students describe their feelings about the situation, 3) students plan what they might do to get what they need. A plan that includes these three levels of experience and understanding could help ten-year olds make sense of generative themes that connect their past experiences, present circumstances and future possibilities.

On the other hand, I’m uncertain about the fit of generative themes with the concrete-operational stage of development. Generative themes are abstract. For example, a generative theme like dissatisfaction is founded upon experience of potential alternatives to present circumstances. When compared to an adult’s experience of alternative possibilities, the experience of a seven-year old is limited. Given her ego-
centrism, can she embrace a generative theme like dissatisfaction, or fairness in a way that is logical and informative rather than just subjective and emotional?

**Organizing and Sharing Information.**

In addition to wondering what kids can do in terms of asking good questions, I’m also wondering what kids can do with information that they’re finding. For example, last year I helped a group of 4th graders develop and conduct interviews about topics they thought would be important for them in middle school. They chose smoking and gangs. Smoking and gangs are probably an issue for kids in our neighborhood as early as 5th grade; however, given the weak social studies foundation in our school, I probably should have had them research the basic functions of our community before researching these other issues. I’ve already addressed this same question – where do we start – in the section above about beginnings. Still, I can draw upon my experience with this activity to think about the level of understanding that 4th graders could have about organizing and sharing information.

If they’re conducting interviews to learn more about gangs in the middle school that they will attend, how good should their notes be? They would need to learn shorthand or paraphrasing. They would learn that they couldn’t expect to get down every detail. Could they also be listening actively enough to ask follow up questions? Should I teach them to write down facts and their responses simultaneously?

How can I teach these skills without losing momentum and interest in the content? After the interview experience last year, I thought of a new way to support their note taking and keep the study moving. While the kids are asking questions and taking
notes I could record the interview. I would review the kids' notes and I would listen to
the recording, taking notes that are a little more detailed than what my kids took. Then I
would replay the interview and give kids the opportunity to add to their notes or start
over. Finally, if necessary, I would show them my notes and ask them to pick out 3
important things that they had missed on their own.

I wanted the kids to use information to solve a problem, for example by writing
comics as public service announcements that will educate their peers about the real
pressure to join gangs and healthier alternatives. How good could their comics be? How
will I know if a kid is putting for her best effort? Will they incorporate peer pressure, the
need for camaraderie, protection and revenge? Will they just depict the serious problem
with a silly solution like in a video game?

To give new legs to the type of rich learning for understanding that Dewey
pioneered, Perkins enacts an analogy of learning the “whole game” and asks, what is an
appropriate junior size version of a “game” or discipline like math, history or public
service? (Perkins, 2010). My depiction of kids using interviews to write comics to
motivate peers to make smart choices about friends and gangs is complex because it
invokes overlapping “whole games” – journalist, comic author, and activist. Is this vision
of success too grand in scope? What are the right “games” to play and what are the
appropriate “junior versions”?

The preceding paragraphs show both what I know and what I still have to learn
about the progressive organization of subject matter. I value connectedness and
continuity and thus aim to study experiences that are part of my kids’ lived experience
but lead them to understand a fuller and richer form of their experience. This vision of a
teacher’s role is responsive and expansive and part of organizing a process of living in
the classroom. On the other hand, the questions I pose above reveal complexity that
makes it hard to organize this process. Mostly my questions reveal that I am still learning
to listen to kids and facilitate their learning. For example, all of my questioning about the
gang unit above is probably all for not because these particular 4th graders had not studied
families, communities, needs and wants in kindergarten through third grade. Therefore,
they weren’t ready to engage with irregular family and community situations like gang
alliance. In the next few years I hope to learn more about how the teacher can balance
his duty to respond to kids process of living but also to give structure to their experience.

Classroom Management

In addition to my questions about organizing subject matter, I’m also still learning
a lot about how to organize classroom management. This growth connects to my
understanding of authority as it relates to engaging kids in an education that is a complex
and meaningful process of living.

I’ve been distrustful of authority figures throughout my life and as an adult I have
struggled to embody the authority to establish consistent routines in my classroom.
However, at this stage in my career I am beginning to see authority as part of my role as
facilitator of a classroom community. A facilitator needs to create a community in which
students can take risks. Accordingly, the facilitator must make kids feel secure. Whereas
I used to think my first job was to make kids excited to learn, I’ve since developed the
notion that security needs to come first.
In the last year my coach at Achievement First has helped me develop routines that give students a sense of their role and responsibility in our classroom community. I’ve learned to explicitly state expectations for behavior, scan the classroom for compliance, and offer reminders and redirection to students who are not meeting the expectations in a variety of ways that scaffold from least to most intrusive – positively stating “compliance” of some students, giving anonymous public and private corrections, and giving “lightning quick public corrections” (Lemov, 2010). I’ve become more comfortable with this respectful use of authority because I know that I am responsive to children’s needs in other ways as I’ve detailed throughout in this paper. These teacher actions help to create an environment that is focused enough to meet TFA’s academic goals.

This development shows a positive influence of TFA. However, the spirit of my authority doesn’t come from TFA. It comes from the sense I’ve made of myself as a learner and as a facilitator through my experiences at Bank Street. TFA helped me learn what to do to organize a classroom, my experience at Bank Street helped me learn how to do organizing the classroom so that I am supporting and guiding, not controlling.

However, I still struggle to integrate the social needs of children with the demands of our academic learning. Children need to talk and laugh. I fear that my children don’t get enough opportunity to do this in their homes and community because they are so engrossed in video games and because their school schedule is so demanding and long. I try to be relaxed with kids and I try to design learning tasks in which they share ideas and interact. Still I struggle to balance their social and academic needs. I’m confident that in
the years to come I will learn to structure the interactions my kids have in our classroom so that both their academic and social needs are consistently met.

Conclusion

Given the contradictory quality of the experiences that I had through my involvement with Bank Street and TFA, I’ve found that it’s essential for me to focus on child development in order to select appropriate goals of education. Considering TFA’s ignorance of child development and Bank Street’s expert focus on the same, the latter has helped me identify what I value more than the former. For me, the goal of education must be to engage children in the process of living rather than just to prepare students as future wage earners.

I agree with TFA that the qualities of leadership are an appropriate paradigm for the role of the teacher. However, the way TFA defines leadership disrespects the skills and abilities of kids. A good leader is only one agent in many kinds of transactions. He should interact with the people he is leading - inspiring, listening and allowing for personal responsibility. These roles of the leader are ignored by TFA and emphasized in Bank Street’s focus on development and interaction.

For example, TFA is right that I need to invest kids in their learning, but I don’t want to do it by talking about the salary that they will make 20 years from now. I need to help them see themselves be successful in a task or interaction that is meaningful to them. TFA says I need to have high standards for academic achievement that are clearly defined via standardized tests. I agree but I’m dismayed that the focus stops there. I think we’re healthiest when we focus on tasks that have a familiar sense of completion and
achievement rather than on normative measures of achievement and external validation. A word of balance; I understand that some of TFA’s “moves” - emphasizing the potential salaries corresponding to different levels of academic achievement or emphasizing quantitative student achievement data – are politically expedient in our times. It was not my purpose in this paper to judge them as policy positions but to honestly assess why they are goals that don’t motivate me as an educator.

Classrooms of teachers and schools that I have visited who are well respected by TFA often feel antiseptic and anesthetizing. Kids don’t interact. The teaching is supposed to align to the tests, so no matter what lip service is paid to it, interaction is not valued sufficiently. The role of the leader as envisioned by TFA is somewhat of a gatekeeper, asking young people to check a lot of their needs at the door.

In contrast, the focus on growth and development at Bank Street is a quest to connect learners and learning to the world. My primary goal is to break down the walls between the classroom and the world, to support growth by encouraging kids to make meaningful connections between their learning and their world. In the future this will mean that my curriculum flows from experiences like trips, performances, projects, interviews and interaction with family members. To move toward this goal at this point in my career I’m trying to cultivate “aha” moments.

I’ve analyzed how to cultivate these “aha” moments, when kids are making connections: the moment when kids emerge from confusion, the moment when they complete a task, and the moment when they pose a problem.
When I help my kids seek these connections I’m helping them see their education as a process of learning rather than a preparation for future living. Inspired by Piaget’s interactionist theory of learning, I encourage openness. If I help kids make connections between academics and their experience, I put the thinking on the kids; in contrast, when I teach only in the I/We/You way after breaking things down, I’ve already done most of the thinking for the kids. I’m most comfortable teaching in a way that resembles apprenticeship and dialogue. I do the real performance, whether it’s reading or math and the kids become a part of it. They think about it and choose their own point of entry and can feel partially successful. When I do notice them struggling, I can stop the flow to teach an explicit I/We/You lesson about a specific skill and the kids pay careful attention because they’ve felt involved along the way. They make better sense of explicit teaching. They become more active in a role that is usually passive. I’m telling kids that it’s ok to be confused; it’s ok to be learning. I’m helping them see the learning process as the goal rather than seeing the score, the achievement or the answer as the goal.

When I’m engaging my kids in tasks I’m helping them act in the world to fulfill their need for industry and autonomy and significance. Whether they are making something new or mimicking, as a first step, something old, they feel they are an active part of the world.

When I create the opportunity for kids to pose problems, I’m showing them that the world can be created. They are asking questions and proposing solutions. I’m also engaging them in the habit of mind where convergent and divergent thinking meet – seemingly disparate ideas are connected. If learning is connected to their world, kids are
lead to an emergent understanding of themselves and an understanding of the world as emerging along with them – changing and evolving and a site of constant learning.

I have to think that kids are capable of much more than filling in bubbles on tests, and kids need to think this too. I have to involve them in a process of living so that learning becomes one of the primary ways that they relate to the world.
Reflection

Writing this paper was a long and iterative process. All along I’ve thought about the process with a mix of judgment and warmth. I’ve thought, “Why is this taking me so long?!” But I’ve also thought, “Wow, I couldn’t have writing that 6 months ago, I’m glad I’m taking this slow.” I’m pleased to have this space to reflect on the process with some finality.

In order to figure out what goals of education work for me, I needed to figure out myself. My experiences are complex and I believe that’s why the process of writing the paper was so lengthy.

I was raised by parents who grew up in post-war U.S. America. The predominant values of this era seem to be competition and individualism. Moreover, I sense a nervous trembling within this concept of individualism. The rights of the individual are celebrated, but fear of other individuals seems to engender a bizarre mix of detachment, paternalism and over-manipulation by authorities and intense isolation and competition between individuals. So, growing up, I saw education as a competition. I focused on having the best grades, and seeming smart to win recognition from adults. I applied to the most prestigious colleges and saw admission there as the end of a great education.

On the other hand, I’ve also been inspired to focus on education as an entry into dialogue with the world. I read voraciously about history and about other cultures. I saw education as a chance to get to know the world and as an opportunity to help right wrongs
of past injustice and intolerance between cultures. I wanted to use my education to involve myself in my community and to get to know other communities.

Both these narratives swirled in my mind as I tried to understand my experiences in TFA. I wanted to think that the central goals of education could be about both competition and community. I like to grapple with complexity yet ironically, I tend to see disputes as standoffs between absolute, either/or values. I didn’t want to dismiss TFA’s vision of education entirely. However, as I wrote the paper, I realized more and more how much competition can mute or terrorize child development.

I heard Bill Ayers speak towards the end of the process of writing the paper. The central thread of his speech was that education is not “something that can be bought and sold in the market place” (Ayers, personal communication, 2010.) There it was—commodity—right in TFA’s mission statement. “One day all children will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.” With more conviction than before, I realized that education cannot help kids figure themselves out if education is something to be bought and sold. These goals are contradictory.

Ironically, judging TFA more sternly opened me up to write about it more fairly. At first I had slighted TFA in the literature review, both by saying “there’s nothing useful from TFA about child development” and by adding some quotes that were easy to criticize but that I knew were not representative of integral parts of TFA’s program. Moreover, I had organized my literature review of TFA around concepts relating to my critique, whereas I had confronted Bank Street’s readings on their own terms. Ultimately, my critique of TFA cohered into my moral conviction against seeing
education as something to be bought and sold. From then on I was able to present its teachings more fairly. I went back and reworked my literature review so that there was a better balance of TFA and Bank Street. When TFA was mysterious I had slandered it. When I understood it, I looked at it, found the frustrating parts of my own educational history there, and cast off most of it.

After presenting TFA more fairly in the literature review, I discussed the process of writing this paper and figuring myself out with a fellow TFA alum. We talked about the need to read TFA in a proactive, creative way. I had seen the experience as something disabling. I’ve felt like TFA asks you to fit yourself in a box and do only what they tell you. I felt there was no person behind the teacher, only a widget. My friend and I talked about the possibility to make the experience our own – take what seems useful and discard the rest. This conversation helped me look at the example of another TFA colleague who was considered successful by the organization but who seemed to have gone beyond the norm, specifically by using authentic and performance assessments. This made me more confident to present my own “partial” successes in this paper.

Moreover, when another friend asked me to say in one sentence what I thought the paper was about, I was stumped for a moment and then replied with Dewey’s quote about education being a process of living rather than a preparation for future living. At that point I refocused on Bank Street’s knowledge about interaction and development and saw how these relate to building a space for a process of living.

Around this time I also realized that I had lost the focus of my thesis – defining the goals of education that I agree with. I had turned parts of my paper into a judgmental
performance review of myself and of TFA. It wasn’t my purpose in this paper to judge TFA’s goals as policy positions but to subjectively assess why they don’t motivate me as an educator.

It was also hard for me to take a lot of learning that happened as experiences and map them onto the structure and style of an academic paper. I eventually cut out many things that were too incidental, too precious and I stated more boldly and personally some theories and big ideas.

In conclusion, writing the paper has been a process of figuring myself out. I’ve reflected on my own educational history and I’ve matured a lot. As a teacher I’ve clarified what I value, and gained the confidence to critique what I don’t value. As a scholar I’ve learned to be fair in a literature review, and to clarify both my argument and the purpose of my paper. I’m thankful to the friends and colleagues who have been a part of this process. I’m also grateful to the wonderful children who have been with me daily in this process.
BANK STREET AND TEACH FOR AMERICA

Works Cited


