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Educating towards democracy in infant/toddler classrooms: the example of the Bank Street Family Center

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Educating Towards Democracy in Infant/Toddler Classrooms:

The Example of the Bank Street Family Center

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Abstract

This independent master’s project (IMP) hopes to shed light on the possibilities and importance of including the youngest citizens of the country (children aged zero-three), their families and their teachers in the discourse and practices of democratic classrooms. The influences of Counts, Dewey and Vygotsky on the developmental-interaction approach are looked at and five fundamental principles of the approach are outlined. In addition, this IMP considers the influences of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire within the framework of the developmental-interaction approach and in fostering democracy in classrooms. Furthermore, this paper looks at how the developmental-interaction approach can be applied in practice in an infant/toddler classroom to promote Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic life skills. By tying the educational philosophies of the developmental-interaction approach with infant and toddler developmental theories this paper shows, through the example of The Bank Street Family Center, that Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic skills can and should exist in infant and toddler classrooms. Finally, because there has been little written on democratic infant and toddler classrooms there is much room for expanding this research by looking at other infant and toddler classrooms in the United States and abroad.

Keywords: Developmental-interaction approach, Paulo Freire, Gartrell, democracy, infants and toddlers, Bank Street Family Center.
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the progressive educator must always
be moving out on his or her own,
continually ... reinventing
what it means to be democratic in his or her
own specific cultural and historical context
(Freire ed., 1997, p.308)

Rationale

Reflecting back on my life before Bank Street, I realize that many experiences have led me to enroll in my masters in Infant and Family Intervention (General and Special Education) and have directed me to the topic of my IMP, democratic classrooms for infants and toddler. I will share three significant experiences in my life that I believe have directed me to where I am today. The first is my educational experience at an elementary Catholic school in the heart of London, England. There, I became friends with children from many backgrounds, many religious beliefs and economic realities. We all wore the same uniform and were held to the same moral and educational standards. It was not what I would call a progressive school but it did set a precedent in my belief system that the right to respect and equality was the rule. Many years later, one of my first working experiencing was being a personal assistant for a lady with cerebral palsy. It was my first time working intimately with a person with severe physical disabilities. I bathed her, dressed her and fed her before she went off to work with her two masters degrees, her guide dog and her passion for advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. She was an inspiration and was definitely a reason that I wanted to learn more about special needs. Third, was my experience living in São Paulo, Brazil after graduating from Barnard College. There, I participated in participatory filmmaking workshops, in public hearings
and interviews for minority groups who were fighting a multimillion aluminum company that wanted to build a dam on their land. I also taught English to emerging middle class Brazilians. These few experiences led me to think about how participation, self-advocacy and education should be accessible to all and most importantly for the youngest members of society. I felt that Bank Street College of Education and their developmental-interaction approach supported my own ideas about what the role of education should be. These experiences are a few examples of why I chose Bank Street College of Education for my masters in Infant and Family Development and Early Intervention/ Early Childhood General and Special Education. Over the years I have become increasingly interested and convinced that democratic ideas of citizenship and participation can and should begin in the early years of life; zero-to-three years of age.

In thinking about how a democratic classroom can come into fruition for infants and toddlers, I wanted to look back at the approach, which made me believe it was possible in the first place. In reflecting on and reevaluating the developmental-interaction approach I felt that I would have a better understanding of how it can be used in classrooms today and of its limitations. Nevertheless I found it odd that Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, considered one of the great educational theorists outside of Dewey was hardly mentioned in the construction or consideration of the developmental-interaction approach. Freire, a more recent educator than Counts, Dewey and Vygotsky, worked with lower and middle class illiterate people in South America, specifically Brazil and Chile. Whereas Dewey, Counts and Vygostsky were from the turn of the 20th century, since his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote numerous pedagogical books up until he died in the 1990’s. I am suggesting that Freire, a man who holds similar ideas to his predecessors yet much more experience in what new and emerging democracies look like and the role they play in education, should be reconsidered, specifically
for these purposes, in the context of the developmental-interaction approach and in the promotion of democracy in the classroom.

**Biases and Limitations**

I have been working at the Bank Street Family Center since starting my studies in the Infancy program at Bank Street College and have a certain affinity for the center. I have worked in the same classroom for three years with three different head-teachers, giving me a range of experiences within the developmental-interaction approach. When I started working there I was unaware that children so young could learn so much about themselves and others. As I became more aware of the teachable moments the work became more demanding yet more rewarding. I feel a great responsibility to make sure that each child, all of whom are of different ages and have different abilities, is treated and taught equally by both their peers and teachers. Needless to say, these relationships and equal opportunities do not happen on their own, they need to be created and nourished by each community member no matter how young, old, impaired or abled they are.

One of the greatest challenges in promoting equality and democracy in a classroom is making sure it exists on the level of the adults as well as the children. A lack of respect on the level of the teachers or administrators can lead to great limitation in practicing a democratic classrooms. I have fortunately been lucky enough to have co-workers who respect and share my educational philosophy. I would, however, be naïve to think that this was the case for all teachers in all infant and toddler classroom. Thus, for this IMP, I will bring light to the best of The Bank Street Family Center and write about an “ideal” classroom standard to foster the foundation of democratic ideals for our youngest citizens. Furthermore the Bank Street Family Center is located in a private Manhattan school, which has its own limitations because although the
families cultural differences and the children’s developmental differences are reasonably diverse, the educational and economic diversity of the families and teachers is low. I would have liked to compare and done more in-depth research into different child-care centers in the U.S. and abroad to see their different philosophies, reasons and practices on promoting equality and democracy in their classrooms. On the one hand I wish I could have gone deeper theoretically and practically for this Independent Master’s Study but on the other hand I look forward to extending and elaborating this IMP in the future.

Finally, perhaps the most concerning limitation for my IMP is the potential lack of interest from the greater Bank Street community in my topic. There is a lack of attention and sometimes disrespect that my profession, working with infant and toddler with general and special needs, receives even from administrators and educators within the larger Bank Street community which unfortunately reflects the opinion of the larger society as well. The Bank Street Family Center is the only section of Bank Street that openly and purposefully works with children with special needs and their families. As a consequence of different educational practices within the larger community there is the constant discussion of restructuring the Family Center. Thus, I am writing this IMP in part to advocate for the philosophies and practices of the Bank Street Family Center so that they can find their voice again in the community and show how crucial the role of early childhood education is in building skills for later life. Although the work that is done in the Bank Street Family Center is not perfect, it is done with so much thought and dedication to the children and their families. As a result, I feel that this IMP is a way of showing that we, the educators of young children, can be included in conversations on social justice and democracy in the classroom because if we are not included neither are the children we teach and that is an injustice to them.
Overview and Methodology

This Independent Masters Project (IMP) is separated into four parts. Part I looks at current discussions around democracy and education and will introduce Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic life skills:

- Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual (DLS 1)
- Expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways (DLS 2)
- Solving problems creatively – independently and in cooperation with others (DLS 3)
- Accepting unique human qualities in others (DLS 4)
- Thinking intelligently and ethically (DLS 5)

These democratic life skills will also be referred to in Part III of this IMP.

Part II looks at the theoretical framework behind the developmental-interaction approach and its influence in democratizing education. Furthermore, Paulo Freire will be introduced as an important recent educator to consider when reevaluating the developmental-interaction approach. I break down the developmental-interaction approach into five parts. The approach:

- looks at the “whole child”
- believes in the reciprocal relationship between social/ emotional development and cognitive development
- constructs a physical environment responsive to all children’s needs
- constructs a social and emotional environment responsive to all children’s needs
- highlights the importance of the teachers role in scaffolding and reflecting on educational ideas and practices.

Through research, observations, anecdotes, reflection and interviews, Part III looks at the practical application of the developmental-interaction approach in promoting Gartrell’s
democratic life skills within the context of an infant/toddler classroom. I will look at my own experience as a teacher in a mixed aged, mixed abilities classroom in New York City to demonstrate how teachers are trying to foster democratic life skills in an infant/toddler classroom.

In Part IV I conclude my argument that infants/toddlers, their families and teachers can foster and learn democratic life skills leading to more conscious citizens. However, I suggest that this can only happen when educators are conscious of their role and right to impose certain ideals in their own classroom. Finally, this part offers suggestions for future research in this area of study.

**Part I: Democracy and Education**

The United States is in a moment of history in where democracy needs to be reinvented and rebuilt. No matter how much The United States is advocating for democracy around the world, The United States is a democracy in crisis and the public education system is a good indicator of this. It is not surprising that a report released last year by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights showed “tremendous disparities in the public school experiences of minority and white students” (Simon, 2012. p. 1). This is but one example of inequity and anti-democratic ideals in the school system. So, as teachers and citizens we have a responsibility to support and promote democratic ideas and ideals, such as equal rights, respect and freedom of choice, here in the United States especially now when racial divides, class divides and party divides are getting wider and wider.

Hence, as a teacher one must constantly be thinking about what values and morals are being brought to the classroom environment. Teachers must reevaluate how they are fostering “the development of reflective and creative persons” (Ayers, Kumashiro, Meiners, Quinn,
Stovall, 2010) in their classrooms, so that their students can become respectful individual within a caring community. As a teacher of the youngest members of our society, infants and toddlers, I feel a great responsibility to at least think about how basic democratic ideas and ideals, such as respect, equality and freedom of choice are being transmitted and transferred to the children and co-workers with whom I spend most of my day.

Discussions amongst progressive educators like those studying and working at Bank Street College of Education, often revolve around the question of how to bring social justice, investigative learning and democracy into classrooms. However, the conversation often ends when thinking about these ideas existing in early childhood centers with children younger than three years of age. There seems to be a common misconception that infants and toddlers are too young to be included in the discussion or the experience of social justice and democracy. In my mind, there should be no question that the practice of social justice and democracy be included in early childhood centers because even children at this young age are internalizing early interaction with their community and it is the responsibility of the teachers to create a suitable environment.

**Educating for Democracy**

In 2000 The World Education Forum ‘Education for All’ was held in Dakar, where the E-9 group signed *The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All Commitment*. The E-9 countries comprise of Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan, which are nine highly populated developing countries in the global South with emerging democracies. These nine countries account for more than 50 per cent of the world’s population and as a result have great educational decisions to make that will weigh heavily on global education trends. One of the most concerning findings for early childhood education was
that of the more than 800 million children under 6 years of age in the world, less than one third were receiving any form of early childhood education. Furthermore there was still great inequality for girls trying to access education (“The Dakar Framework”, 2000). There was not specific mention of children with special needs in the forum but there was a general understanding that there must be more done to provide education to all children, even those who are marginalized (disabled, homeless, in foster-care etc.).

The final report for the world education forum in Dakar was broken down into six sections, which reflect the overall goals of promoting quality, equity, democracy and citizenship in education for all. Why are these issues being discussed in education forums and how can democracy actually be taught? It is clear that by simply declaring a country as democratic and writing it in the constitution does not create a democratic society. So, how do you create people who can live actively and interactively in a democratic country? How is democracy fostered through education and demonstrated in a classroom? More importantly, how can the foundations for a democratic classroom be established for infant and toddlers?

According to the regional framework for action for Europe and North America, adopted by the conference on Education for All, education for democratic citizenship is not merely taught but it must also be experienced and practiced. The report states:

Education for democratic citizenship concerns not only the teaching of democratic norms but essentially the development of reflective and creative persons. It is based on the understanding that democracy is not fixed and immutable, but rather that it must be built and rebuilt every day in every society. Over the past ten years, our countries have joined together in the will to form democratic societies; for such societies, the future is to be invented and built; the mission of education is to prepare future citizens so that they can take part in this initiative. (“Regional framework for action Europe and North America”, 2000)
Understandably the definitions of equality and democracy are profound and can be long debated. For the purposes of looking at these concepts in relation to infant and toddler classrooms I will turn to Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic life skills, which he lays out in his book *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic life skills (DLS) for young children are:

- Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual (DLS 1)
- Expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways (DLS 2)
- Solving problems creatively – independently and in cooperation with others (DLS 3)
- Accepting unique human qualities in others (DLS 4)
- Thinking intelligently and ethically (DLS 5)

Gartrell (2012) does not believe that these five steps need to occur chronologically but “the demarcation that is qualitative… is between the first two steps, which constitutes the child’s ability to meet needs for safety, belonging, and acceptance, and the second three steps concerning growth needs.” (p.112). Gartrell’s (2012) focus is predominantly on pre-school children and he does not specifically mention infants and toddlers in his book. However, I believe that his five democratic life skills can and should be part of an infant and toddler classroom. In the practices applied in the infant and toddler classroom at The Bank Street Family Center mentioned in part two of this IMP, the first two steps which create a safe, belonging and accepting environment are realized through an understanding of the young children’s separation and attachment needs through the primary care-giving system, phase-in, home visits and family photos. The final three democratic life skills points can be realized through an understanding of theory of mind, self-soothing, scaffolding and the classrooms physical environment.

Undoubtedly, adaptations must be made by teachers to accommodate for developmental needs
and age-appropriate materials and language in an infant and toddler classroom. That is, developmentally appropriate practices and scaffolding must be used in order to translate the essence of Gartrell’s (2012) five democratic life skills to an infant/toddler classroom. Thus, teachers play a crucial role in fostering and promoting these skills.

**Part II: The Developmental-interaction Approach**

In order to look at how it is possible in practical terms to create a democratic classroom in an infant and toddler classroom, the ideas of the educators and philosophers that influenced the developmental-interaction approach must be revised as it is only through the relationship between the theory and practical approach that social change in the classroom can even begin to come alive. However, as the name implies the developmental-interaction approach is an approach that is necessarily changed and influenced by time and circumstance. As Freire says:

> the progressive educator must always be moving out on his or her own, continually … reinventing what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context (Freire (Ed.), 1997, p.308)

As a member of Bank Street College it would be unjust to view the approach as stagnant or as being unchangeable. As educators living in a constantly changing world, we must be flexible and critical about how the developmental-interaction approach relates to the realities of the society we live in today. Thus, I will look at the developmental-interaction approach through the ideas of those educators that influenced it, specifically Dewey, Counts and Vygotsky. I will however also include Paulo Friere into the discussion as a “newer” educator who shares similar concerns and visions for education with his predecessors who necessarily influenced his work.

The developmental-interaction approach grew out of the Progressive Era at the beginning of the 20th century and continued to be reshaped into a practical approach by the members of the
Bureau of Educational Experiments, which was founded by Lucy Sprague Mitchell in 1916 and was later known as Bank Street College of Education. The Bureau of Educational Experiments was one of the small-scale, independent schools looking to change the make up of the public educational system (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). One fundamental belief that came out of the Progressive movement “was the deeply political nature of education, through which people could create a better world and a truly democratic society” (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p.12). The developmental-interaction approach was discussed over hundreds of conversations between its founders the same way that the approach continues to be discussed and reflected upon in the classrooms of Bank Street College of Education to this day. A conversation about the approach cannot be had without mentioning key influential philosophers, Counts, Dewey and Vygotsky. Mitchell, like Dewey (1938/1972) and Counts (1932/1978), saw education as a means for social justice and thus having as its core ideal to better society and promote democratic ideals (Nager & Shapiro, 2000).

Counts’ experience in Russia as they consciously attempted to “democratize its social, cultural and economic life, assigning to education a crucial role in that process” (1978, p.viii) influenced his ideas on progressive education in the United States. Counts saw progressive education as a movement, which should not simply be child-centered but must instead have a clear purpose. As Counts (1932/1978) states, “Professor Dewey has, in my judgment, correctly diagnosed our troubles: “the schools like the nation” he says, “are in need of a central purpose which will create new enthusiasm and devotion, and which will unify and guide all intellectual plan” (p.33). In this light, both Dewey and Counts believed that education and educators must have a clear social purpose in order to prevent society from becoming stagnant.
Dewey’s work was especially popular in the 1930’s and this is when he and his colleague George Counts heavily influenced the Bank Street community (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). By the 70’s, however, Dewey’s influence was waning at it was at this time that educators started looking elsewhere for inspiration. During the late 1960s Vygotsky showed up in conversations and became increasing popular amongst progressive educators, including those at Bank Street College of Education.

Although the Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky’s ideas on children and schooling were particularly relevant to the developmental-interaction approach, it was only until later in the 20th century that educators in the United States became familiar with his work. Partly because it was only until the 1960’s that Vygotsky’s first English-language book *Thought and Language* (1962) appeared. Furthermore, Vygotsky’s work had been centered around universities and did not influence school age education until later. Nevertheless, as a psychologist, Vygotsky saw the interaction between people and the environment as key to development. He believed that development simply could not exist outside a social context. Vygotsky saw the role of the school to be a “mediating device between the culture and the individual user or learner” (Nager & Shapiro, 2000, p.75). Although Vygotsky’s work was not recognized as being relevant to education until later in the century Martin (2000) suggests there are many similarities between Vygotsky and the developmental-interaction approach. He says:

> Both assume the social origins of knowledge and collaborate construction of knowledge. Both assume that learning is social and shaped by the child’s experience, which is determined by society. Both view the function of learning tools as critical mediators in an educational setting and both support the significance of microgenetic development in a valid account of learning (p.85-86)

Like Vygotsky, because of political situations in their home countries, Paulo Freire’s work first became know to educators in the United States in the 1970’s. In 1970 Jonathan Kozol,
a non-fiction writer, educator, and activist, best known for his books on public education, wrote a letter to The New York Review of Books praising Freire’s work. Kozol wrote, “I believe that Freire’s ideas to be directly relevant to the struggles we face in the United States at the present time, and in areas far less mechanical and far more universal than basic literacy alone” (Gottesman, 2010, p.377). Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also received praise from the Washington Post in 1972 (Gottesman, 2010). Even with his work being praised it was only in the mid to late 80s that Freire’s first book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* began to gain wide reception in the United States (Taylor, 1993). Although *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was Freire’s first and possible most well known book, he wrote many other influential books and articles such as *The Politics of Education* (1985), *Reading the Word and the World* (1987), *Pedagogy of the City* (1993), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), and *Letters to Christina* (1996), to name a few, which Freire himself suggests should also be considered when reevaluating the possibilities of education in the present day (Freire (Ed.), 1997).

Although Dewey, Counts, Vygotsky and Freire were influenced by their own historical, political and social situations they all saw education as being intrinsically political and in their own right contributed to the dialogue of education for social change. They also agreed that an individual’s experiences and the community’s experiences are intrinsically related. Therefore to create a positive experience for the individual is to create a positive experience for the community and vice versa. This is difficult enough to grasp in theory and in practice even harder to create.

Although Dewey, Vygotsky, Counts, and Freire’s educational philosophies all influenced the developmental-interaction approach in terms of advocating for a more politicized educational system, the developmental-interaction approach is a marriage between philosophies and theories.
Thus the influences of Piaget, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, Sameroff, to name a few must also be taken into consideration, especially when looking at how the approach is relevant to very young children. The developmental-interaction approach offers a practical approach to understanding education as a means for social change, by looking at both the individual child and their surrounding environments. Although there are many components to the approach I have chosen to focus on five key points that continue to be used and reflected upon by teachers at Bank Street College to this day with the hope that education can be a catalyst for social change and for promoting democracy. The developmental-interaction approach:

- looks at the “whole child”
- believes in the relationship between social/ emotional development and cognitive development
- constructs a physical environment responsive to all children’s needs
- constructs a social and emotional environment responsive to all children’s needs
- highlights the importance of the teachers role in scaffolding and reflecting on educational ideas and practices.

The whole child

As viewed through the developmental-interaction approach, the whole child bridges both the influences of the environment with all the developmental aspects of a child’s needs. The whole child refers to the child as a social-emotional, physical and intellectual being influenced by both their physical and social environment. So, in order to accommodate for the needs of the whole child both the physical and social/emotional environment the child is learning in must be taken into consideration. The individual child, the environment and the social/emotional can never be separated and in fact work towards the development of each other.
Dewey, Vygotsky, Counts and Freire all, in their own way, talk about the importance of the relationship between the social and the individual for both the education of the social (the community) and the individual. They believed that thinking and change did not happen solely within the individual child but instead when they interacted with their environment; the physical space, other peers and teachers. Not only did Dewey, like Vygotsky, believe that the interaction between the individual and the social were important but the quality of that interaction was even more important. They both “emphasized the nature of social interactions, particularly the interdependence of adult and child engaged in mutually created collaborative activity within the specific social environment” (Nager & Shapiro, p.26). Counts (1932/1978) saw teachers as having an active, not a passive, role in bridging the gap between school and society and felt that teachers should “play some part in the fashioning of those great common purposes which should bind the two together” (p.28).

Although both Dewey and Freire grew up in different parts of the world with different immediate social realities they both have similar educational philosophies and practices, which give importance to democracy in education. In their philosophies, they saw the important role of experience and social interactions and how these two concepts must go hand in hand for democratic education to exist in the classroom (Shyman, 2011). “The philosophies of education put forth by both Dewey and Freire presented new trends of supporting, if not demanding, a new means of critical awareness, inclusion, and the centrality of democratic citizenship in learning situations” (Abdi, 2001). Freire, like Dewey, believed that learning experiences are never isolated, but are built from past experienced and shaped by the social structures and relationships of the present (Roberts, 2000). Thus, the child, their experiences and their relationships can never be isolated. Instead all three factors are in constant relationship. Part III of the IMP will look at
the practical ways an infant and toddler classroom attempts to think about the whole child and bridge the gap between the individual children and their larger community (their caretakers, home life and community).

**Teachers Role: Scaffolding and Reflection**

The relationship between children, their experiences and their relationships is vital when thinking of the important role of the teacher in fostering positive learning experiences and development. As Dewey (1938/1972) points out, not all experiences are equally educative and thus it is the responsibility of the teacher to help create positive experiences that will generate a desire for further learning. Thus teachers using the developmental-interaction approach in their classrooms should recognize that even in using a child-centered approach to education they have an important guiding role in the learning experiences of the children. Teachers can facilitate learning while still maintaining a child-centered approach by meeting each child at their developmental level and scaffolding the children’s play ideas and interactions.

Both Dewey and Freire write about the flaws of traditional educational, or as Freire puts it ‘banking education’, and support a more progressive approach to education, which views the teacher as a collaborator with her students rather than authoritarian dumper of information. Similarly to ‘banking education’, which sees the students as empty containers ready to be passively filled with knowledge, traditional education in accordance with Dewey “imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods” (Dewey, 1938/1972, p.18) and leads to little active participation from the students resulting in empty learning. Both Dewey and Freire believe that traditional or authoritarian teaching suppresses the students’ ability to be creative and interactive with their environment. Whereas, the role of a teacher in progressive education, is to allow children to have critical consciousness, or as Freire (1999) states, *conscientização*, so that they
can become free to create and experience knowledge both internally and externally through the interactions with their environment.

The role of the teacher as facilitator, bridge builder and liberator is not easy, which is why critical reflection is at the heart of the developmental-interaction approach and is used by all staff and faculty members at Bank Street. Critical reflection is the combination of doing and thinking. Both Freire and Dewey write about reflection as being a key part to learning both for children and teachers. Freire (1999) called this combination of both action and reflection praxis, “the unity about what one does (practice) and what one thinks about what one does (theory)” (Gadotti, 1994, p.166). Dewey saw reflection as involving a) systematic rigorous thinking, b) action and as c) happening with others who share the goal of personal and intellectual growth (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010). The basis behind both Freire and Dewey’s idea and critical reflection is that little will be learned if a person only acts on the world but does not think about his actions. Equally flawed is if a person only thinks about the world but does not act on their thoughts. As teachers, this expectation cannot only be held for the children in our classroom. Teachers must also constantly go through this process of reflection to become more engaged members of the community. In part III of this IMP, I will look at how teachers practice their role as facilitator and use critical reflection to improve their practices.

**The environment: physical and social/emotional**

The classroom environment is the key to how children will interact with the materials and with each other. In order to foster democratic skills in a classroom a teacher must construct school environments responsive to all of the children’s individual needs, while at the same time fostering community life. That is, they must provide an environment that allows all children to feel safe so that they can interact and experience their environment equally. There are two key
aspects of an environment that I believe support a democratic classroom. The first is the physical environment, and by this I mean the layout of the classroom and the choice of materials. These should reflect all children’s backgrounds and needs and provide choices for the children in a developmentally meaningful way. The second is the social and emotional environment of the classroom. That means striving for an emotionally responsive classroom, through primary-care giving (as indicated by age and context), use of language and self-regulation, so that each child and their families feel supported emotionally as well as developmentally. The goal is that children can begin to recognize, understand and express different emotions in a safe environment. As Dewey (1938/1972) states, “Educators should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (p.40). This in turn will hopefully increase the teachers and children’s empathy and sympathy for others as they learn to be part of a community where every member has rights to choices, materials, care and respect. Part III of this IMP will look at practical ways in which, both the physical and social/emotional environment is set up in an infant and toddler classroom to create a safe, equal and developmentally and culturally appropriate space for the children and their families. In doing so, examples of how the foundations of democratic life skills are being formed will be shown.

**Social/emotional development’s influence on cognitive development**

The developmental-interaction approach cannot be put into place without knowledge of the infant and toddlers development and what influences affect them. As noted in the above section, many educators and theorists understood that the physical, emotional and social environments of a child affect their development. In order to get a deeper understanding of how the environments affects a child’s development a brief overview of the influences of Piaget, Erikson,
Bronfennbrenner, Sameroff and neuroscience is given in order to explain how the individual, on a cognitive level, is influenced by the social. The hope is that by highlighting the intricacies of the relationship between the social and the individual, educators will give more thought into the type of physical and social environment they provide for infants, toddlers and their families.

Even with breakthroughs in neuroscience, the nature versus nurture controversy persists in conversations of infant development even today. Francis Galton was the first man to coin the term “nature versus nurture” at the beginning of the 20th century, which soon led to different fractions of theorists supporting either/or (Sameroff, 2010). Whereas some theorist believed that behaviors were innate, others such as Watson, a behaviorist, believed that behaviors could be instilled in young children and could have lasting effects throughout adulthood. Freud and his successor Erikson, both psychoanalytic theorists, believed that sexuality and individual life experiences shaped development. However, Erikson was one of the first theorists to look at how the social context in which an individual’s experiences shaped their development. He focused on how children’s bodily and emotional experiences in relation to their socio-cultural experiences could produce the senses of self (trust, shame, guilt, and inferiority) (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010). At around the same time, in the early 20th century, Piaget, a constructivist theorist, wrote that, based on his observations, children come to understand the world from their active interactions with it. One of his footprints on the developmental-interaction approach is that he believed in process over product and understood that emotional development had an impact on children’s development. While Piaget had an enormous impact on infant development, none of them accounted for variations amongst individuals based on environmental or cultural influences.

In the 1970’s, Uri Bronfenbrenner, theorized that nature and nurture were far more
interconnected than the previous debates had allowed. Bronfenbrenner, influenced by systems theory (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010) developed the ecological systems theory, which proposes that many factors of the environment, such as family, school, work and politics, influence the development of young children (Bronfenbrener’s circle of influences).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory has been supported and advanced over the years. He saw that there was a dynamic relationship between nature (the individual) and nurture (the environment). The fluid relationship between the two spheres, which are composed of hundreds of subparts, can clarify the difficulty scientists have in creating a linear model for child development. Sameroff’s dynamic systems approach and in particular the transactional model of development takes Bronfenbrenner’s circle of influences but looks at transactional effects that occur over time rather than just as immediate interactional effects (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010). Rochat (2001) views that through the dynamic systems approach infant behavior is influenced by psychological, physiological and cultural elements. Rochat (2001) believes that infant behavior is influenced “from the low level of brain, muscular, skeletal, or motivational functioning, to the high level of perceptual, emotional, or cognitive functioning.” as they all interact with one another in “an ultrademocratic system, where no one variable has more predictive power than any other (p.200).

Recent educational research focusing on children three and under emphasizes the aptitude of children at this age in recognizing ethnic, social and cultural differences. Children as young as two begin to notice differences in external appearances, starting with gender and skin color (Oliveira-Formosinho & Araújo, 2001). Furthermore, it has been well researched that positive social relationships during the first few years of life create positive understanding of oneself and one’s relationship to others (Fogel, 2009). Thus, depending on the role of the caretakers, young children’s cognitive abilities to recognize similarities and differences amongst their peers and
teachers can be transformed into positive or negative social interaction. Hence, the caregivers can help pave the path early on in life as to whether young children have respect and tolerance for others or not. As Oliveira-Formosinho & Araújo (2001) say, “It is reasonable to assume that conceptions and attitudes towards diversity are built from birth and that the ecological systems in which the child lives have a very important influence on the formation of those conceptions and attitudes, including early childhood education and care contexts” (p.3).

Neuroscience has demonstrated that cells in the brain interpret and rearrange the different senses experienced in the environment (Rochat, 2001). In utero and the first few months of life, synapses connecting cells are exuberant in number but as the child grows the synapses that are not used wither away. Extreme cases, of this have been documented in orphanages where infant are left alone without social and emotion interaction and without stimulus to engage their senses. Tragically, they can literally become brain damaged and die as numerous amounts of synapses wither away because “human beings are wired from birth to be social: we literally are built to form relationships” (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010, p.65). These cases are extreme examples of the importance of social interaction for survival.

Researchers, neuroscientists and educators can now agree that our emotions and learning become entangled almost instantaneously after birth. In the classroom this can mean that the atmosphere in the classroom and how safe children feel can affect their learning. Teachers therefore need to think about the tone that they are creating and the curriculum they are providing in order to foster an environment where children feel emotionally stable to learn. As Casper & Theilheimer, (2010) rightly state, “Rather than being separate from learning, our emotions drive our learning.” (p.75).
Finally, due to the plasticity of the brain neuroscientists can actually see how the brain is molded by experiences that will then later affect other experiences (Eliot, 1999). As Eliot (1999), a neuroscientist, says, “From the first cell division, brain development is a delicate dance between genes and environment” (p.5). Not physiology, psychology nor culture is exclusive of the others and instead all interact together in one system to determine the development of infant behavior (Rochat, 2001). Thus, it is not enough to say that both nature and nurture influence the development of a child. Instead the relationship between all of the different components must be considered, as Bronfenbrenner and Sameroff have demonstrated with their respective systems theory. If so then educators of infants, toddler and their families must acknowledge the many different factors influencing development and strive to create an environment that supports all of the domains of development while taking into consideration the impact of the larger environment on the children. Perhaps even more importantly, when thinking of a transactional approach, the impact that the children have on their environment now and in the future must be taken into consideration. For this reason, educators must consider their own influences on the shaping their students’ cognitive and social/emotional growth and what lasting impact this may have as the children bring these experiences into their future with them.

Part III: Practicing the developmental-interaction approach in an infant and toddler classroom to promote Gartell’s (2012) democratic life skills

This section of the paper turns to the practical means by which the developmental-interaction approach can be used in an infant and toddler classroom to promote democratic life skills, as laid out earlier by Gartell (2012). I will be looking at the case of an infant and toddler classroom at The Bank Street Family Center where I have been working for the past three years.
I will give examples through interviews, anecdotes and descriptions of my classroom to show how the foundation for democratic life skills can be created for infants, toddlers, their families and their teachers by practicing the developmental-interaction approach. The first two points of the developmental-interaction approach mentioned in Part II, the whole child and the influence of social/emotional development on cognition, are intertwined in the daily life at The Family Center. With the knowledge that the whole child as well as there social and emotional needs are always being considered the following section of the IMP focuses in depth on the practical applications of three of my points from the developmental-interaction approach:

- constructing a social and emotional environment responsive to all children’s needs
- constructing a physical environment responsive to all children’s needs
- the teachers role in scaffolding and reflecting on educational ideas and practices

I will show how these points can promote Gartrell’s (2012) democratic life skills in an infant/toddler classroom.

Note: Throughout the following part of this IMP the reader will notice that I refer to Gartrell’s democratic life skills as DLS followed by a number, which refers to one of the five skills mentioned in Part I of this paper.

The Bank Street Family Center: An overview

The Family Center is a non-profit model child-care center located at Bank Street College of Education. As a whole the center is composed of four classroom, two infant-toddler classrooms and two pre-school (3-5 year olds) which are all inclusive, meaning that children diagnosed with special needs are included in the classrooms with children who are typically developing. The pre-school classrooms have sixteen children at any time in their classroom. A total of twelve children in the pre-school classrooms have IEPs (Individualized Education Program) and qualify for special education. An additional five have IEPs to receive additional services but that do not
include special education. Both the infant and toddler classrooms are mixed age and inclusive, meaning that children, some with diagnosed special needs, ranging from the ages of six months to three years are in a classroom together. Currently there are thirteen children in each classroom although never more than eleven at a time. There are a total of three children with IFSPs that include special education and three more who receive services such as occupational therapy or speech therapy.

Next year, the infant and toddler classrooms will accept children with special needs only if their families can afford the high cost of the tuition, which may possibly decrease the number of children with special needs in the classrooms. This would be particularly saddening as the benefits of having an inclusive classroom are advantageous to all members of the community and creates an environment which, in my opinion, is at the pinnacle of what a democratic classroom should look like; a microsystem of society where people of all ages and abilities work together and respect each other. Although The Family Center at Bank Street has its flaws, I believe that it is a solid example of how a democratic classroom can begin to exist for the youngest members of our society as well as their families.

Each day in my infant and toddler classroom there are numerous glimpses of how democratically the classroom runs; in the way that the children learn to interact with each other with respect and care and in the way teachers work so hard to create equal rights and opportunities for all of the children. They do this by having a deep understanding of child development, by adapting materials and furniture and offering choices so that both the individual and the community is respected and honored. Perhaps it is difficult to argue about how the foundation for democracy is being established when a three year old puts her arm around a two-year-old peer while a teacher reads them a book or when a child asks a teacher why her skin is
brown and gets the honest response of, “we are all different colors”. If, however, as teachers we want to foster equality and respect in the young children we teach, these are examples of honest educational moments that must be encouraged and embraced, which at The Family Center teachers strive to do on a daily basis.

**Constructing a social and emotional environment responsive to all children’s needs**

Families at The Family Center come in many different compositions and sizes. There are single parents, gay and lesbian couples, straight couples, extended families, multiracial families and trilingual families to name a few of the diversities. Although The Family Center is a private and expensive child-care center, financial aid is provided for many families and discounted tuition is available for staff members from the Bank Street community allowing, to some extent, socio-economic diversity.

The infant and toddler classrooms at The Family Center are usually the first experience that parents and children have with separating from one another for an extended period of time. Teachers at The Family Center are acutely aware of the emotional impact of separation and as a consequence treat with sensitivity the first few weeks of a family’s experience at the center. Through phase-in, home-visits, family photos and daily notes, teachers try to create an environment that is as stress-free as possible to support the social and emotional needs of both the families and their child.

Through secure attachments with caregivers at home and/or at childcare centers young children learn to trust and feel safe in their environment and only then can they begin to explore and experience their environment fully. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth spearheaded the foundation of attachment theory, which according to (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010) postulates that:
1) A child’s secure early relationship promotes greater independence and social-emotional competence later on, in accordance with the quality of the child’s ongoing attachment relationships and life experiences (Thompson, 2000), 2) Sensitive and responsive care early in life promote secure attachments, 3) children with secure attachment are able to use adults as a secure base for exploration or to return to when sick, fatigued, or threatened. (p.69).

Thus one way of fostering Gartrell’s (2012) first democratic life skill, finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worth individual is to give every child and family the right to feel safe, secure and respected.

**Phase-in, home visits and family photos.** The first few weeks of child-care are called phase-in. Phase-in is where families and their children are introduced slowly to the new classroom, the teachers and the peers that they will be spending their days with. Each family must do phase-in whether they are returning families or not, but each family’s needs are respected and treated individually. Different caregivers can participate in phase-in and depending of how the child and the family members are doing, phase-in can last a couple of day to a couple of weeks. There is an understanding that getting off to a secure start where trust can be established between the family and the center is vital for the wellbeing of all parties involved.

In addition to phase-in, the teachers in the classroom do home-visits, where two teachers visit a child at their home (if parents agree) at the beginning of the semester. This one experience helps bridge the gap between home and child-care, instilling trust and respect for each member. During home-visits, teachers can learn more about the child’s home environment, parenting styles, customs and traditions that the families have and parents often feel more comfortable to ask questions or express concerns in the comfort of their own home.

Families are also asked to bring in family pictures to be displayed in the classroom for their children to look at and refer to when they miss their families. Some families include extended family members, their nannies, their pets, some just their nuclear family. Family photos
are hung so that each child has access to their photos. Thus, a toddler who can climb on the sofa may have their photos next to the sofa whereas an infant who is just crawling will have their photos lower down on a wall where they can reach them.

Throughout my years of teaching at The Family Center, family photos generate a lot of discussion and questions amongst the children and are a wonderful way of starting conversations about family differences, and a preliminary step in understanding the concept of equal but different. Here is an example of how family photos are observed throughout the year and generate socially important questions and comments from young children.

*One child with a mother and father noticed that another child with two dads did not have a female image on her family pictures. The boy, 2.6 years asked a teacher, “Where is her mommy?” The teacher replied truthfully, “she has two daddies, she does not have a mommy”. The boy stared at the teacher processing the information then asked, “but why?” The teacher replied, “well, some children have a daddy and mommy, some have two daddies or two mommies and some have just one mommy or daddy. Every family is different”. Later that week the teacher saw the same boy looking at a book, ‘And Tango Makes Three’, by Justin Richardson, a book about two daddy penguins that “adopt” a baby penguin. The book was strategically placed on the children’s bookshelf to support the understanding of different compositions of families.*

Here, the teacher answered the child in a truthful and age appropriate way and then provided resources (in this case books) so that the child could process the information when and if they were ready to.

Besides phase-in, home-visits and family photos, teachers keep in touch with families daily through daily notes, newsletters and parent-teacher conferences, which occur twice a year and include an in-depth write up of what their child is doing in each developmental domain. Teachers are also open to e-mailing or meeting with parents individually if a particular issue arises. These methods of communication are more ways of bridging the gap between home and The Family Center and are crucial to understanding the “whole child” as both a member of a family and as a member of a community. The child benefits from the social and emotional
support of being able to embrace, talk about and question their time at The Family Center with their family and vice versa.

**Primary care-giving system**

If a child does not feel safe in a classroom they will not be able to fully participate as a member of the classroom. It is therefore up to the teachers to create a safe and friendly environment where every child can have their social and emotional needs met in order to be able to fully participate in the classroom activities. In order to achieve this level of security and trust in infant, toddlers and their families the Family Center uses what is called a primary-care giving system. A primary care-giving system “which requires both serious staff commitment and dedicated planning, allows each baby and toddler to build a close, intimate bond with a particular person – in other words, an attachment” (Balaban, 2006, p.6). Primary care-giving is a system in which one teacher is assigned greater responsibility over a small group of children in the classroom. All teachers in the classroom are responsible for all children but a primary caregiver will keep certain children in their mind at all times and will help certain children with more “challenging” moments of the day, such as separation, diapering, nap and oppositional behavior. The hope is that the child will quickly learn that they can turn to the their primary care-giver for reassurance, security and help when they need it. The belief is that once a child has a secure attachment with an adult in the classroom they will be able to explore their environment fully. Something each child has a right to, no matter their age or abilities.

Once a child has bonded and trusts their primary care-giver as a person who will care and comfort them when they need it, the child will check-in with their primary-care giver, like any other important person in the child’s life, as way of self-regulating. This is often seen with the youngest members of the community as the example below shows:
A ten-month-old girl is crawling close to her primary caregiver and exploring blocks by banging them together and turning them in her hand. An older peer comes whooshing by, a little too close for comfort, as he is it on his way to the bookshelf. The ten-month-old becomes startled and crawls back to her primary-care giver’s lap and cries. Within less than a minute, the girl is happy again and can begin to explore the environment.

Here, the ten-month-old was able to use her primary caregiver as a secure base or safe place, to calm down and stop crying. Learning who can comfort and support her needs is an early aspect of self-regulation that will serve as the foundation for expressing and regulating emotions with her community as she gets older.

**Interview: A teacher’s perspective**

K.S. What role does social and emotional responsiveness play in creating a democratic classroom?

G.G. We encourage positive behaviors in the group to help respect the individual and their place within the community. We use redirection, play that fosters self-regulation and choices. We provide emotional literacy. We validate children's needs and feelings and most importantly teachers model the respect and rights of all children. Each child has a right to try and to make choices. A child is asked if they would like to try sitting on the potty. If they choose “no”, we respect their right to say "no". If a child cannot say "no" due to developmental challenges we will adapt the materials to ensure they have a vote in meaningful decision about their body.

Teachers are socially and emotionally responsive to assure respect for each child. For example,

**Example one.** When a little boy was sad his mom left the teacher said, "it is hard to say goodbye. You look sad. Mommy will back after nap. Mommy always comes back"

**Example two.** A little nonverbal girl was patting another verbal child on the face. The verbal girl made a face and appeared upset. The teacher informed the verbal girl that the nonverbal girl is still working on learning how to use her words and was trying to say hello to you. The verbal girl then smiled and said, "hi" to the nonverbal girl. (G.G., personal communication, March 2013)
The examples that the teacher gives not only show the teacher’s social and emotional responsiveness to the children as in seen in example one but also demonstrates the building blocks of the development of theory of mind which is having the ability to reflect and think about one’s own thinking as well as other people thinking. The teacher has to help the child in example two understand her peer’s intentions and then the girl responds in an kind manner to her peer. Although this child may need help to read her peers’ intentions throughout the year, with the social and emotional scaffolding she will eventually be able to do this for herself.

**Theory of mind**

Although research suggests that it is only around the age of three or four that children gain theory of mind and are more able to understand their own and others’ thinking, the foundation for understanding other’s emotions begins much earlier. The development of theory of mind practices the second (expressing strong emotions in non-hurtful ways) and fourth (accepting unique human qualities in others) democratic skill laid out by Gartrell (2012). Before the age of 12 months children learn to observe and internalize their caretakers responses to different situations. From the age of one-year to two-and a half-years children start to understand their own emotions and are beginning to discriminate simple emotions of others. At this age children also begin to engage in symbolic play where they use objects and actions to represent the mental state of others. (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010).

Theory of mind is a critical developmental milestone for understanding other people’s intentions, desires and needs. Nelson’s (2008) longitudinal study shows how shared experiences between toddlers and their caregivers help to develop theory of mind and thus build an understanding of how other people perceive experiences either similarly or differently than themselves. Laying the foundation for understanding one’s own emotions and intentions is a fundamental goal for a classroom that is supporting DLS 4, *accepting unique human qualities in*
other (Gartrell, 2012). This however could not happen unless the child has a sense of acceptance and security within the group (DLS 1). Creating an environment where children learn to understand their own emotions as well as read their peers and teachers emotions can increase empathy and sympathy, skills that are fundamental in creating a respectful community.

**Self-regulation.** Throughout the day in child-care and later on in school, children are learning to control their impulses, a task that can be very challenging for even adults. At the Family Center the expectation for the infants and toddlers is not that they are necessarily self-regulated, but that they are learning the skills to self-regulate. Casper & Theilheimer (2010) see the development of self-regulation as:

> The adult helps the infant’s immature brain stabilize until it can organize its own processes, at first by providing the infant with more regulation – for example rocking and singing to an infant to calm him. Adults continue to play an organizing role with children throughout early childhood but do so to a lesser and different extent as children increasingly become to monitor, pace, and control their own emotions and needs – that is, as they self-regulate (p.65)

As seen in the daily schedule in Table 1 below, self-regulation is especially needed during moments of transition, waiting and increased emotion (fear, anger, sadness etc). The teachers help children to recognize their feelings and through songs, transitional objects, visual and verbal cues or even physically moving environments, are tactics used on a daily basis to respect the children’s big feelings and help them find ways of regulating themselves.

Children are just learning how to understand and meet their emotional needs. As they acquire these skills they will hopefully learn how to function as an individual as well as contribute to their community, which “includes learning what is expected, how to recognize one’s emotions and those of others, and how to communicate so others will respond prosocially” (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010, p.81). Thus, an infant/toddler classroom that promotes democratic life skills is one that lays the foundation for every child to acquire these lasting skills, benefiting
themselves and their greater community by creating a safe environment where emotions begin to be expressed, understood and respected by all (DLS 1 and DLS 4).

Here is another example of self-regulation from another child that was previously in my classroom.

A 2.3 year-old girl in the classroom does not like transitions that occur throughout the day. She used to start to cry and lay on the floor face down during these moments. After speaking with her mother, teachers realized that when she is not at child-care she carries a stuffed animal around. We asked her mother to bring it in to see if it helped with transitions. Now, instead of crying, she runs to her cubby, finds her stuffed animal and hugs it tightly. She is better able to participate in the activities that follow with the security of her stuffed animal as it helps her to self-regulate throughout the transitions of the day.

Learning early-skills of self-regulation may seem to only benefit the individual child. In fact, having a few children unregulated in any classroom by screaming, crying, sprawled out of the floor etc. can often affect the ambience of the whole classroom environment. Although these behaviors are not uncommon in many classrooms, and are certainly expected and typical in an infant and toddler classroom, the effectiveness of a teacher helping a child to self-sooth or of a child self-soothing themselves (sucking thumb, hiding, finding toy) can impact the whole classroom. Furthermore, as children begin to recognize their own needs and are able to soothe themselves whether through a teacher, a toy or a song, they will begin to understand their peers emotions and be empathetic towards them. Some children even begin to offer solutions to friends, as the example below suggests:

A three-year old boy with little language is upset and is sprawled out on the floor. A two-year-old girl asks the teacher “what happened?” as she shrugs her shoulder. The teacher says, “It looks like he is feeling sad”. While the three-year-old is still learning methods to self-sooth himself his two-year-old peer knows what he needs. She runs to find her friends “dog”, a dog which belongs to the classrooms but which he loves. She hands him the dog and says “here” and smiles at him and at the teacher then runs off. The boy hugs his dog and within minutes is back on his feet playing monsters with other peers.
As is seen in the above example, the boy became deregulated and threw himself on the floor. His peer had an understanding that something was not quite right and offered him a solution, his dog. She could have only known that his dog would soothe him by being attuned to his emotions and knowing her peers favorite toy. This is an example of a two year old with emerging DLS 3, solving problems creatively and DLS 4, accepting unique qualities in others. This also shows how in a classroom where teachers are attuned to and respect the emotions and needs of the children (DLS 1), the children will also learn to understand and respect their own and others emotions and needs.

**Language: Whole communication and choice of words**

Through different communication tools children begin to learn how to express different emotions in non-hurtful ways (DLS 2), solve problems individually or as a community (DLS 3) and accept that their peers may need to communicate differently from them (DLS 4). The key to language working as a tool towards a democratic classroom is in the reflection that occurs either by the teachers or the children themselves. Through language the teachers label children’s emotions and help them reflect on how they might be feeling and thus how others may be feeling, offer various ways of communication (pictures, sign language, verbal language, books and songs) so that children can autonomously express their wants and needs as well as label and understand others wants and needs.

One of the benefits of a literary rich environment is the influence that literacy and language has on social and emotional development. Reading, writing, singing, drawing, listening, and engaging in conversations support both children’s literacy and social-emotional development because it helps them to reflect on their own emotions as well as those of their peers (Santos, 2012). In a mixed age and mixed abilities class like the infant/toddler classrooms
at the Family Center language is understood and expressed in many different ways. Part of the classroom set-up and practice is to think about how to accommodate the receptive and expressive development of all of the children in the classroom. Teachers do this by using verbal communication, using sign language, using song and using visuals to label objects around the classroom and to help children make requests. Often teachers will use all three methods of communication together. As a consequence the children also start to learn to communicate through all of these different means. This, in turn, creates an environment where all children can communicate in the classroom regardless of their age or abilities.

Furthermore, the infant and toddler classroom has a book corner where children have access to a variety of books that are relevant to what they are experience (topics ranging from separation, pottying, going to the dentist, change in seasons etc.) and some which specifically promote social and emotional development (titles include but are not limited to *How are you peeling* by Saxton Freymann, *When Sophie gets angry-- really really angry* by Molly Bang, *Sometimes I’m Bombaloo* by Rachel Vail). Songs such as ‘If you are happy and you know it’ or ‘Five little ducks’ are also sung at circle time and throughout the day as a way to help children reflect and express different emotions. The intention is that the books, as well as the other communication tools used in the classroom fosters an enhanced sense of self and acceptance of others (DLS 1) while at the same time giving the children an opportunity to understand and express their emotions (DLS 2).

Often during group activities such as snack or circle time teachers will use verbal and sign language to communicate with the group. Here is an example

*Ten children are sitting down for snack. The teacher holds up the snack in the air and points to it. Then she asks the children verbally and through sign do you want “more crackers” (saying and signing it). A one-year old points and babbles at the snack box, a child with speech delays makes the sign for more and attempts more, a shy child signs for more and a couple of*
two and half year olds say “I want more crackers”. The teacher acknowledges each child’s answer by responding “oh, I see that .... wants more”. For the children that did not answer, the teacher goes closer to them and asks them individually if they want more.

Here the teacher is offering a variety of communication strategies for the children and they respond to her in different ways. She respects each answer by acknowledging them verbally. Then, knowing her students the teacher goes to individual children in case they did not hear or attend to what she asked.

Throughout the day, especially at play time, teachers are providing language for children with the goal that they will be a responsive partner, a teacher who is “tuned-in to the children’s abilities, needs and interests…which encourages the children to take an active part in interactions, both with her and with her peers” (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002, p.5). Giving children the opportunity to communicate openly in a classroom is not only beneficial for their language and social skills but can also help with self-regulation. Here is an example of how I created a way, through a song, to help a large group of children in my classroom regulate their emotions buy providing them with language as they waited for snack after one previous failed attempt.

Over the past few weeks the children have been screaming loudly as they sit and wait for their snack at the snack table. I get frustrated after weeks of hearing the same screaming and raise my voice with an angry face and tell the children, “It is toooo loud!”. The children are quiet for the rest of snack. The next day, however, the screaming started again as they waited for a snack. I had a moment of realization. Yesterday, I had scared them into being quiet but had not taught them any skills to wait for their snack. This time I take a different approach, having realized that my last attempt was ineffective on many levels and having recognizing the root of the problem, the children did not know how to wait. I tell them in a calm but firm voice, “children, please stop (with verbal and sign language). You can sing; I’m waiting, I’m waiting, I’m waiting for my snack”. I sang it over and over, rocking my body side to side, until they all joined in. I made up the song on the spot and was pleasantly surprised by how well it worked.

The first time around I had scared the children but not offered any assistance. The second time around, the children’s emotions were acknowledged and they were given a more
appropriate way of expressing them. Furthermore because I incorporated the kinesthetic part of the song by rocking my body children without language had a way of participating. The “waiting song”, as it is now known in the classroom, has become an effective tool over the past three years to help children regulate their emotions together in a more appropriate way. Children can be heard singing the song independently to themselves as they wait to wash their hands or put on the their shoes.

Besides providing different ways of communication for the children teachers have the important role of being active listeners so that the children also learn to do the same. When a child is communicating either through sign, words, a scream or by pointing a teacher should acknowledge that the children have something important to say. Often in the classroom you will hear teachers say phrases such as “I see you saying no” or “I hear you saying you are not ready”. The teachers are acknowledging the communicative intent of the child and repeating it so that the child knows what it is communicating and that the teacher understood it.

In a socially and emotionally responsive classroom like at The Family Center teacher are attuned with the emotional and social needs and wants of the children. One of the ways teachers show the children that they are attuned to their emotions is by communicating what they see to the child by saying “You are crying, I see that you are sad” or “your body is jumping, I think you are excited”. The children also become attuned to their own emotions and those of others. There is an especially strong reaction from the children in the classroom when another peer is crying. The below example shows the different ways the children demonstrate that they are attuned to their communities needs:

A two year old is crying by the cubbies after mother said goodbye. She is being comforted by a teacher. Many of the children who are playing stop, look to where the crying is coming from and check in with a teacher. A ten month old looks at his primary-care giver for reassurance and a hug. A two-year-old with language delays says, “boo, boo” (he associates crying with being
A one and eight month old looks at her teacher with concern and says, “sad” and makes a sad face, while a three year old asks a teacher, “why is she crying?” All of the children are genuinely concerned for their peers and the teachers respond by saying “I know, I see she is sad but a teacher is helping her. She is ok, maybe she misses her mommy”. The three year old then offers another reason, “or maybe her daddy”. The teacher listens and addresses each child’s concern until the conversation shifts.

Constructing a physical environment responsive to all children’s needs

The children who enter the infant and toddler classroom at The Family Center are of all different ages and sizes and thus have different developmental needs. The teachers responsible for organizing the classroom space need to take into consideration all of these different aspects in order to give each child access and choices to materials and spaces in the classroom independently of their age, size or disability. One of the goals when thinking about the physical environment of the classroom is that by having teachers who can solve spatial, material or developmental issues creatively (DLS 3) while accepting the unique human qualities of all of the children (DLS 4), the children will also experience and learn to do the same.

Interview: A teacher’s perspective

I interviewed the head-teacher I work with to ask about the thought process behind the set-up of her classroom environment and how she thinks it works to provide a democratic classroom. Here are some of her responses:

KS: Can you give me an example of the thought process that goes behind the physical space of the classroom?

G.G. The teacher organizes the classroom and models an environment so that children can feel like meaningful, individual, active participants. We have centers and allow children to decide how long they stay at a center and which center they would like. There is the sensory table where children sit, a water or sand table, an easel, a bookshelf, dramatic plaet area, manipulatives area and a cozy corner. For example, the art easel is built to allow 2-3 peers to paint at the same time.
This allows for individual interest in creativity but at the same time practicing sharing the space with the other individuals. Or, the sand table is at a height that allows children of multiple ages and abilities to participate. An infant will be held so that they can participate too. There are enough materials to offer 3-4 children to participate at the same time. This strategy allows children to practice self-regulation skills of impulsivity and waiting while at the same time opportunities to share and create with peers in the same space.

KS: How does the set-up of the classroom foster democratic ideals?

G.G: Choice is an important part of democracy. We offer choices where it is safe. We offer choices in snacks, what books they want to read, if they want to lay in the cozy area or play at the water table. We offer them opportunities to do for themselves and feel successful verses robbing them of the experience to feel like an important participant in their classroom. Teachers help children make choices who may not be able to make choices in the same way as most of the other children. For example

**Example 1:** A non-mobile infant in the room cannot yet make choices with his body. I, therefore, bring him around to other areas of the room to ensure he has the same opportunities as the rest of his classmates. This may mean that he sits in the sand table to play while older kids stand at the table.

**Example 2:** A boy with Cerebral Palsy was non-ambulatory and nonverbal. He had picture cards so he could communicate by tapping with his fingers where he would like to go within the classroom. He had the right to choose his activities just like other children. (G.G., personal communication. March 2013)

**Daily routine and materials.** Although the structure of the day is the same each day throughout the year there is a lot of flexibility within the structure to meet the needs of all of the children. For example, free play, circle and outing never look different each day as children bring new and creative ideas to their play and as teachers adapt materials to accommodate for each child’s
development. Furthermore, the schedule in and of itself does not reflect the intricacies of each part of the day such as separations, transitions, and skills learned throughout the day.

An example of the structure of the day for an infant and toddler classroom at The Family Center, as well as the skills being worked on by the children with the support of the teachers, can be seen in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Skills being worked on by all children (with teacher support)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00-10:00</td>
<td>Arrival and Free-play</td>
<td>Attachment and Separation, exploring, sensory play (science), using all developmental domains (motor, language, social and emotional), Self-regulation (sharing, waiting), community building (collaboration and scaffolding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-10:15</td>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>Transition, self-regulation, community building (sitting together), self-help skills (feeding self)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-10:30</td>
<td>Circle time</td>
<td>Gross motor (movement), community building (listening to friends choices, dancing and singing together), self-regulation (wait for songs and for outing plan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30-11:45</td>
<td>Outing</td>
<td>Social Studies (exploring neighborhood), gross motor, small group bonding, separation and attachment (leaving classroom and peers and then reuniting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:45-12:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Transition, self-regulation, community building (sitting together), self-help skills (feeding self)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>Early release for children with special needs</td>
<td>Attachment and separation for child, caregiver and other children who stay at child-care longer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-2:30</td>
<td>nap time</td>
<td>Separation, self-regulation (no talking in nap room), self-soothing (getting self to sleep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30-3:00</td>
<td>wake-up, snack</td>
<td>Re-attachment, self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00</td>
<td>pick-up for some children</td>
<td>Attachment and separation for child, caregiver and other children who stay at child-care longer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00-4:00</td>
<td>Free play</td>
<td>Exploring, sensory play, using all developmental domains (motor, language, social and emotional), Self-regulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The materials put out in the classroom must also allow for each child to feel included and to be able to participate. This not only welcomes each individual child to participate and thus feel included (DLS 1) but also fosters the acceptance of different peers physical and cognitive abilities and qualities (DLS 4). The materials are chosen based on the children’s interests, developmental needs and diversities. Often this may mean that materials need to be adapted to facilitate the different children engaging them. Table 2 below demonstrates how and why the materials chosen are adapted so that both individual and group needs are taken into consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Thinking of individual</th>
<th>How to include individual</th>
<th>How to include all the children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play-doh</td>
<td>Child has sensory needs that make it challenging to touch the activity</td>
<td>Include tools so they don’t have to touch play-doh with hands</td>
<td>Include a variety of tools that support different levels of fine motor development (small and large handles, containers that open differently)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Play</td>
<td>A child has recently started wearing glasses</td>
<td>Including a figure, doll, stuffed animal wearing glasses</td>
<td>Include a number of play glasses and toys with glasses so other children can participate as well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Time</td>
<td>Child is unable to support self for standing songs due to gross motor delays</td>
<td>Teacher supports child by holding hand or offering trunk support</td>
<td>Offer other children the same support. Show children how they can help their peer by demonstrating hand holding. Include songs and instruments at circle time so that every child feels successful during the activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Easel</td>
<td>Child cannot yet control a thin, long paintbrush effectively to make marks</td>
<td>Put out different sizes and widths of paintbrush</td>
<td>The child with the special need will chose the brush that is the easiest to use – the other children will not necessary notice why the teacher put out different kinds of brushes. Including all and excluding none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory table (sand, water, flour, confetti, soil etc)</td>
<td>Child cannot reach or has hard time standing at table</td>
<td>Lower table, lift child up, bring a chair over</td>
<td>Allow other children to bring over chairs too if they wish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>New event or occurrence (potty ing, new baby, separation)</td>
<td>Include books that represent event or occurrence as well as diversity of the classroom</td>
<td>Books should include a representation of all of the children. Race, gender, developmental appropriateness (soft books for infants, small books for individual, large books for group, thick pages for children working on fine motor etc)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples in Table 2 are just a fraction of the thought process that goes into the materials and adaptations that teachers must consider in an infant and toddler classroom to respect both the needs of the individual and the group.

**The Teachers Role**

For the teachers, staying in tune with all of the children’s and staffs needs as well as being a reflective individual involves the practice of DLS 3 (solving problems creatively),4 (accepting unique qualities) and 5 (thinking intelligently and ethically). Again, the hope is that by the teacher modeling and practicing these democratic life skills on a daily basis the children
will also experience and eventually be able to practice them. Here, I look at the teacher’s role in scaffolding children’s play and emotions as well as their important task of being critically self-reflective of their practice in order to improve.

**Scaffolding**

Besides staying in tune and respectful of the physical environment and the social and emotional needs of the children, the teachers are also continuously in tune with the other developmental domains that each child is going through (motor, language and cognitive). As is commonly said at Bank Street, *play is the work of the children* and a teacher’s job is to meet each child at where they are developmentally. Teachers do this through scaffolding play in order to reach, what Vygotsky (1978) called, the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)* and is what a child can do “through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 89). Facilitation and scaffolding are thus the means by which the teachers interact with the children and the environment simultaneously to try and provide the optimal learning experiences.

Scaffolding can be the work of more capable peers but it is certainly the job of teachers, and can be done at any moment of the day as long as the tasks and activities are meaningful and interesting to the learner. One way for teachers to scaffold is by asking open-ended questions to get the child to think about possible solutions to the problem. Here is an example a teacher gave of when she scaffolded block building for a three-year-old in her infant and toddler classroom.

_A little boy likes animals and recently visited the zoo with his father. He is also learning how to use blocks. He is successful with animals and needs teacher support with scaffolding his play with animals. His parent shared he had gone to the zoo and loved it. We added animals he may have seen at the zoo to the block area and teachers offered language "where should the animals go? The zoo or the park?" He choose zoo. I said "let's make a zoo with the blocks. What shape do we need? " and the child was able to add a new part to his animal play. (G.G., personal communication, March 2013)_
In this example, the teacher has taken a topic, which she knows interests the child (animals) and uses them to support an area that he is working on (block building and ideation). She uses open-ended question and choice questions to guide the direction of play without dictating it. Finally, the child is able extend his play with the teachers scaffolding and feel confident and excited about making his own choices.

The dedication of a teacher to know where each child is developmentally, what their interests are and where they are moving towards is a foundational block of a democratic classroom. By knowing each child’s needs, each child is given equal opportunities to learn and grow at their own pace. Furthermore, young children pick up the language and care that teachers use and will learn to use the same respect with their fellow peers.

Here is an example of an older child trying to help another peer struggling with a puzzle:

A boy C of 2.8 years is struggling with getting a puzzle piece into the correct spot. Another peer M aged three and a teacher look on. The teacher says “C do you need help? Maybe M can help?” and looks at M. M scoots closer and C starts to joke with her by trying to place the puzzle in all of the wrong places. In the beginning M gets frustrated saying “it doesn’t go there”. The teacher looks at C smiling and says “noooo” in a playful tone and he places the puzzle piece on top of the wrong place. M then realizes C is trying to be funny and begins to say “noooo” in the same playful tone as he teacher. Finally, C places the piece on top of the correct spot and both teacher and M smile but C has a difficult time making it fit. M places her had over his and rotates the piece for him. As the piece slides in they look at each other, smile at each other then at the teacher and give themselves a round of applause.

Here the teacher is scaffolding patience for M by helping her wait for C to figure out the puzzle by himself. C does not get upset that M is watching him and in fact plays a game which shows both M and the teacher that his difficulty is not knowing which piece matches but how to fit it in. M, is able to read her peer and steps in when she sees him getting frustrated and helps.
Scaffolding can only happen as a result of positive social interactions and access to engagement with the classroom materials, both of which the teachers lay the foundation for in the classroom.

**Reflecting on educational ideas and practices**

Many of the experiences had and skills learned by the infants and toddlers in the classroom which work to promote a safe, respectful and equal environment are also being practiced by teachers with teachers and administrators. Crucial to the development of the teacher’s education and understanding is often what comes before and after the school hours. For faculty at The Family Center team meetings, reflective supervision and collaboration are an integral part of the weekly schedule and contribute to fostering a democratic classroom.

The ratio of teachers to children in each classroom at the Family Center is at least one teacher for every three children. Yet, because the Family Center is affiliated with the Bank Street College and has close ties with Teacher College at Columbia University there are often student-teachers working in classrooms for months at a time, which can move the ratio to one teacher to two children. Having an abundance of teachers is often a dream for any head-teacher but at the same time is extremely hard work. As new student-teachers come into the classroom they require orientation to the program and supervision. The team must learn to become flexible and patient as new staff members arrive. Within the classroom community amongst the teachers is built through transparent communication and respectful language and outside of the classroom is built through reflective supervision and team meetings.

Although there is much emphasis at the Family Center for self-reflection, this does not necessarily mean that reflection happens alone. Teachers at the Family Center have both team meeting once a week and reflective supervision, with a more experienced colleague every other week. Team meeting gives the member of the staff in one classroom the chance to sit down
together, without children, and talk about how things are going in the classroom, what was easy or difficult in that week, what certain children are working on and what curriculum plans are for the upcoming week. Reflective supervision is more individual and happens only with a teacher and one other more experienced staff member who can facilitate the direction of the conversation. During this time, the teachers can talk collaboratively about individual triumphs and struggles and reflect on past experiences and how they triggered certain emotions. This of course cannot happen without trust. Again, similarly to the children when they first start in a classroom and need to build a healthy attachment, staff members also need to feel safe enough and valued enough to express their ideas and “strength based, collaborative interactions without judgments make others feel worthy of trust” (Casper & Theilheimer, 2010, p.27). Although there are disagreements and conflicts in team meetings and supervision, practicing collaborative and critical reflection is especially important when the goal is to foster these skills in the children in the classroom. It not only promotes leading by example but also cultivates respect for the children from the teachers as they identify more personally with the skills the children are trying to learn. Thus, as teachers attempt to foster democratic life skills in an infant and toddler classroom they too need to practice the skills in order to respect the intricate balance between the social and the individual, the teacher, the children and their families.

**Part IV: Conclusion**

This IMP tries to draw attention to the possibilities of democratic discourse and action in infant and toddler classrooms. Discussions around democratic classrooms are often had when referring to grade school children. However, in this IMP I proposed the possibility of seeing the developmental-interaction approach as a means for social justice in an infant/toddler classroom to promote democratic life skills laid out by Gartrell (2012). Through the example of the Bank
Street Family Center I show how the foundations for democratic life skills can be fostered and experienced by infants/toddlers, their families and their teachers. The hope is that this IMP will evoke discussions around the importance of the quality of the environment, both the physical and the social/emotional environments, provided for the youngest members of society (children zero-to-three years). A classroom that can be conscious of laying the foundation for learning democratic life skills (Gartrell, 2012) or skills with a similar underlying philosophy of promoting acceptance, independence, community, problem solving, respect and intelligence between all of its members will create a safe and reflective environment for young children to have respect for themselves and for others.

I believe, like Counts, Dewey and Freire, that a key consideration is not whether classrooms are fostering these skills in infant and toddler classrooms, it is whether the teachers fostering these skills are aware, or conscious, of their actions. The Bank Street Family Center is surely not the only infant and toddler center doing everything mentioned in Part III of this IMP and is not necessarily the best example in the world. However, it is, in my opinion, a center where teachers are becoming increasingly conscious of their role and goals in the classroom to foster a democratic space for children and their families. Perhaps more important, fostering a democratic classroom for infants/toddlers and their families is being aware and conscious that it is happening because without consciousness or reflection there can be no learning or improvements. Although I would not go as far as using Freire’s (1999) term of oppressed to describe infants/toddler or their teachers, I would agree with Freire when he says “In dialectical thought, world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from
reflection” (1999, p.35). That is, educators must be aware, reflective and critical of the environment they are creating for their students and their student’s families.

Some might argue that promoting democratic life skills in a classroom is imposing, or as I like to say fostering, ideals on students. This assumption would be correct. Educators must have a clear purpose of what ideals and skills they are fostering for their young students. As Counts (1932/1978) argues:

…all education contains a large element of imposition, that in the very nature of the case this is inevitable, that the existence and evolution of society depend upon it, that it is consequently eminently desirable, and that frank acceptance of this fact by the educator is a major professional obligation. (p.9)

In accordance with Counts, for educators not to be aware of what they are fostering or teaching is a form of negligence. In my opinion, what is worse than teachers imposing a certain ideal in the classroom, such as democratic life skills, is imposing, or fostering, nothing at all. After all, a classroom is a politicized place and it is important to be realistic about the responsibility teachers have, when thinking about creating a purposeful and intentional environment that reflects the values they hold for themselves and for their students (Ayers et al., 2010).

As more and more young children go to child-care at an earlier age, the discussion must be had about the quality and goals of these centers. As I have tried to demonstrate in this concise IMP, children from zero-to-three years of age, as well as their families, have a right to be included in an environment that respects them and teaches them to respect others by offering experiences that are worth while for both the individual and the community. After all these young children grow up fast and will soon become citizens that impose their own ideas and actions onto the world. Thus, the hope is that if they have been given the social/emotional
support and are provided with an environment that offers opportunities to learn they will bring that knowledge to the larger world with them.

This IMP has merely touched the tip of the iceberg when it comes to possibilities for social justice in infant and toddler education. I hope that I will get the opportunity to observe other centers educating children zero-to-three year olds around the U.S. and abroad to see how they promote democratic life skills or other forms of social justice. Most importantly, I hope that this IMP has started the process of removing an age group (children zero to three of age) as well as their families and teachers from the shadows and exposed some of the many possibilities that exist when thinking about educating a future generation.
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