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Introduction: Living a Philosophy of Early Childhood Education - A Festschrift for Harriet Cuffaro

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Living a Philosophy of Early Childhood Education: A Festschrift for Harriet Cuffaro

Miriam Raider-Roth & Jonathan Silin

This issue of the Occasional Paper Series is a Festschrift in honor of Harriet K. Cuffaro, a Bank Street College faculty member from 1968-1998. A Festschrift—a volume reflecting the values, theories, and passions of a senior scholar in a field—seeks to offer scholarship that builds on these contributions. Harriet Cuffaro has touched and shaped more lives of teachers, scholars, and colleagues than we can possibly count. A teacher in her soul, and an esteemed scholar of John Dewey, Harriet has “unfolded and connected” essential Deweyan ideas and made them accessible and meaningful in the lives of teachers. It is our hope that this volume honors the lessons we have all learned from Harriet.

It has been more than 25 years since I (Miriam) first sat in Harriet Cuffaro’s office at Bank Street College of Education, but the image of her welcoming space is still vivid. The centerpiece was a glass case whose wooden frame rested on the floor and met the hanging bookshelves halfway up the wall. On each shelf, Harriet had carefully placed sets of blocks that she had acquired through her own travels and as gifts from colleagues and former students. Each set had a story and a history, color and texture, purpose and possibility. On any given day, with a simultaneous playful and serious gaze, Harriet would tell me about a particular set, inviting me to touch, hold, and play with the blocks. In those moments, Harriet’s philosophy of teaching rested in my hands. We would talk about the history of the set, how it reflected the philosophy of the designer, the opportunities it offered the children at the time, and how it might have informed other educational materials to come.

For me, as a student studying to become a teacher and seeking to understand and experience progressive education, my meetings with Harriet were formative. As her student, I understood

that deep learning was rooted in relationship, in joint study of evocative texts, in being alert to and aware of the social context in which we lived. When Harriet left Bank Street, she gave these block sets to colleagues and students. Today, a miniature wooden farm set sits on my desk, inviting students to touch, hold, and play. They are a beacon, a touchstone of what matters in teaching, a tangible artifact of history and philosophy.

I (Jonathan) never formally studied with Harriet, but like Miriam I have been her lifelong student. And if Miriam's first memories are about Harriet's respect for the past and the way she works with adults, my own are about the courageous and yet supremely tactful way she approaches the present moment with children.

In the fall of 1969 I was working on my master's degree at Bank Street and proposed a thesis to my advisor, Roger Cartwright, on young children's understanding of death. At the time there wasn't much professional literature on the topic, let alone books for children, and he immediately suggested I talk with Harriet. I don't think faculty at the College had real offices in those days, and so I first caught up with her late one afternoon in the hectic lobby of 69 Bank Street, where children and their caregivers mixed with graduate students, School for Children teachers, and Graduate School faculty in a very narrow space. Introducing myself, I spoke awkwardly and nervously about her 1964 article on young children's responses to President Kennedy's assassination. She replied with her characteristic modesty by asking about my own project. I feel like we've been deep in conversation ever since.

What I admired most about Harriet's article 46 years ago and what I continue to admire about her work: the clarity of her thinking and her writing; the specificity with which she records the voices of students and teachers; and the mindfulness with which she offers interpretation. Beyond the description of the children's responses in the days, weeks, and months after the assassination and their individual concerns about power and vulnerability, there is this: Harriet's invitation to talk about a deeply troubling, impossible-to-explain event.

Knowing that the children had spent the long weekend after the assassination in their homes either in front of the television or avoiding it, Harriet left a copy of the New York Times on a classroom table opened to a page of articles about the events of the preceding days. Children might accept or decline the invitation, but this gesture signaled that the classroom with its play-based curriculum was very much part of the larger world. She didn't impose herself and her knowledge; rather, she pointed to that world and welcomed the children to share their own knowledge, accurate or inaccurate as it might have been. Harriet models the essence of progressive pedagogy: a willingness to take responsibility for a world that we have neither made nor of which we approve.

For this Festschrift we have invited contributors whose current work reflects the core ideas that Harriet brought to the field of early childhood education and the study of John Dewey. Above all, Harriet reminds us that to teach means to have a philosophy of education, to articulate the whys of what we do, and to understand that it is this philosophy that guides and shapes the

decisions we make in the classroom. Celia Genishi’s close reading of Harriet’s acclaimed book, *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom*, highlights this dimension of Harriet’s work. Understanding teaching as an enactment of a considered philosophy is deeply informed by Harriet’s study of John Dewey. Dewey—or as Harriet likes to say, “our friend John”—in fact powers every teaching muscle in Harriet’s powerful framework. We are pleased that this issue offers two insightful essays, “Doing Dewey” by Carol Rodgers and “An Inquiry into the Pedagogical Implications of Dewey’s Ecological Thinking” by Simon Jorgenson, that describe the ongoing influence of Dewey’s philosophy in contemporary thought and practice.

Central to Harriet’s understanding of curriculum is her deep-seated belief in open-ended materials, such as paint, clay, water, and sand, that encourage children to examine and reexamine, represent and re-present their experiences. Worldwide, Harriet is best known for championing the use of unit blocks, which she describes as the texts of the early childhood curriculum. At Bank Street, her legendary block workshops and her signature courses on curriculum and principles and problems in education invited generations of students to consider how social studies can become the integrative core of curriculum.

Kristin Einarsdottir’s essay, accompanied by a vibrant photo album of children building and playing, documents Harriet’s 1990s work in Iceland, where her teaching about blocks inspired an entire country’s early childhood curriculum. Complementing this international perspective and adding to the historical scholarship about the role of carefully designed materials in children’s learning, Jeroen Staring’s essay offers new insight into the work of Caroline Pratt, founder of the City and Country School in New York City. City and Country was a formative space for Harriet, where she taught the four-year-olds for many years and later returned as a mentor and beloved friend to the classroom teachers. Through her essay and companion videos, Jane Clarke, current director of City and Country’s Lower School, offers an inside look at the school today and how the essential materials of learning continue to shape the experiences of young children.

The stance of the early childhood teacher—one who listens with keen respect to children’s ideas—is central to supporting children’s exploration of the world. It is also central to Harriet’s scholarship. “Presence in Double Vision” (Miriam’s essay) describes the work of a gifted kindergarten teacher whose colleagues listened closely to him so that he could in turn connect with a boy who challenged his understanding of himself as a teacher and as a man. “Thinking Through Early Childhood” (Jonathan’s essay) suggests that the early childhood teaching stance is a way of being in the world. His essay helps us appreciate not only how Harriet’s teaching shapes the field of early childhood education, but also how it can be viewed as a philosophy of living in a democratic society. For Harriet, learning to live in a democracy is the means and the ends of early childhood education. To learn to live in a community as a citizen and as an activist is the essential work of children and teachers.

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