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Recommended Citation

Winsor, C. B. (2015). The Bank Street Program: Child Growth and Learning in Social Studies Experiences (1952). Bank Street College of Education. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/thinkers/7>

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The Bank Street Thinkers

Foundational Knowledge to
Support our Roots and Wings



The Bank Street Program Child Growth and Learning in Social Studies Experiences

Charlotte B. Winsor (1952)

Changing concepts in social studies curriculum

“Today curriculum breathes in a wider and more friendly atmosphere. Our very vocabulary in curriculum discussions has changed. We speak of ‘flexibility,’ of ‘building,’ of ‘children’... we talk about ‘environment,’ ‘experiences,’ ‘activities’... ‘research’... ‘social thinking,’ ‘social studies.’... These words mean that today schools are thinking in terms of curriculum that contains much more than subject matter and training in adult ways.”²

Experimental private schools have worked and played with these ideas for some time now. They have gone further and put into practice educational programs implementing these newer concepts and carrying them to the classroom. Although approaches have been wholesomely different from school to school, philosophy and purpose are essentially in agreement.

In New York City, several private school groups, representing many years of experimental education experience, have collaborated with the Board of Education on its vast program of curriculum improvement. The Bank Street College of Education has worked in one school district bringing to teachers and children ways of implementing newer concepts in classroom practice.³

In describing this program of in-service training, William H. Bristow of the New York City Board of Education says, “The Bank Street group has applied group processes to the training of teachers... they have developed... practical techniques which helped teachers to carry forward instructional

69 Bank Street Publications, no. 79. Reprinted with permission from *Social Studies for Older Children: Programs for Grade Four, Five, and Six*. Loretta E. Klee ed. Washington, National Council for the Social Studies, 1952.

programs... Building on the premise that a program of improvement begins where teachers now are, their method of work has progressed to the point where it has significance for all schools concerned with the democratic process and with better ways of working with teachers and with children.”⁴

This paper deals first with the formulation of principles of the Bank Street group, particularly as they relate to the social studies, and then develops in some detail the program of one experimental school, which is basically in agreement with the Bank Street group.⁵

While it is patently impossible to present an educational philosophy in a paragraph, it is important to establish principles upon which a program develops. Fundamental to the curriculum thinking of the Bank Street group are (a) understanding of the new and growing field of child development which includes a knowledge of maturity levels and needs, and (b) a belief that the environment (physical, social, cultural) offers the material of curriculum making. This group believes that the middle years of childhood (roughly the years of elementary school) are a crucial time in personality development and perhaps most important of all, that the curriculum or school life plays a major role in clarifying for the individual his role in society. It is not surprising, therefore, to find here a conceptualization of a school program built on social experiences available to the school in its community and appropriate to the understanding of the child.

Viewed in these terms social studies have indeed an encompassing scope. They become a study of man in a given time and place; his land and technology determining his goods; his past laying the pattern for his language, art, and music; and the ways in which his social forms develop out of his past and within his environmental needs.

How much of this seemingly abstract material is appropriate to the needs and interests of the child in the upper elementary grades? We must turn to the child for our answer. In the middle years there is not a complete putting aside of the interests of the younger child. Instead the child builds upon his earlier experience in terms of his newfound maturity, his recently acquired symbolic skills (reading, writing, using numbers) and his broadening social base. He is seeking knowledge, the answers to how things work, how they came to be, and wonders perhaps if everything is all for the best in the best of all possible worlds. As he turns his eyes towards the adult that he is to become, he begins to participate in the standards and ideals of the world around him.

Too often school programs lose sight of the values of teaching children in these years through *new* kinds of experience. They fail to give the child opportunities for dramatic interpretation of the world as he is coming to know it. They deprive the child of emotional affirmation of his intellectual adventures as his world becomes filled with the wonders of the long ago and faraway.

This need not be. In method as well as in philosophy we need to seek sounder and more appropriate ways of meeting child needs. The teachers and psychologists who are the Bank Street group lay no claim to the discovery of any new axioms in educational practice. They have invented no method, no device, no gadget that opens magic doors to learning. What they have done is to establish principles based upon the needs and purposes of children, related to the world in which they live, and reaching for the social ideas which are inherent in the educational objectives of this group of educational workers.

The development of good social attitudes and appreciative understanding of the world in which we live may be considered the purposes of the social studies. Attitudes are not taught by a verbalization of a social, moral, or ethical code. But children can be given within their own experience numerous opportunities to practice good social techniques and to have such practice pay immediate dividends in the smoother functioning of their own group. Situations can be developed in which children find it necessary to assume roles of leadership, responsibility, and contribution. Teaching can be such that the excitement of learning is real and the technique for seeking knowledge is constantly being developed.

In the elementary schools it is not possible to “cover” all the facts of the geography of the world or the history of man. We must, therefore, make selection and inevitably we do this in terms of our values. In the very choice of content in social studies, and in teaching methods we have available the materials with which children can build sound social attitudes.

The geographic concept of man and his world, how he adapts to his world, and how he adapts it to his use can be taught in a variety of ways. Our textbooks are filled with the story of the Eskimo as a blubber-chewing creature sewed into his furry garments—queer and inferior. But Eskimo life also can be taught as a fine demonstration of the cleverness of man in using what he finds in his world to meet basic needs for food and clothing. The Eskimo is still different from us to be sure, but he becomes a person of astuteness and ingenuity.

The story of mankind may be taught with the present a perfect culmination, hardly to be improved upon by the future. Children’s history books state facts but often neglect the underlying reasons and relationships. Democracy springs full-bloom from the wigged heads of the founding fathers, and one closes the book on the president who happened to be in office at the time of its publication and that is that. It is conceivable that a social studies program even for young children can teach our culture as an on-going process, its roots deep in the ways of people who lived in earlier times and distant places. The elementary school child needs to be encouraged to conjecture about the future since we know with certainty that it will be vastly different from our present.

Government organization can be taught as the cooperative answer to needs which man cannot meet individually. Fairly young children discover that in a large city it is not expeditious for each family to dig its own well and so citizens turn to our government for water supply and pay taxes accordingly. Children begin to understand that man needs to relate to man very early in his social functioning; survival itself calls for group effort.

The most difficult concept of all, a sense of being rooted in the community, can and should be taught without chauvinism. The pattern and plan, even the dream of our way of life is appropriate material for children in the middle years of childhood. But the essentially experimental quality of a democratic philosophy need not be missed. Perhaps a final goal of the social experiences and learning should be that children are so taught that they come through the elementary years with group values that are positive but not absolute.

Granted agreement on goals, purposes, and even on methods for achieving optimal social growth in children of the upper elementary grades, schools have nevertheless developed widely dif-

ferent approaches to their social studies programs. The City and Country School in New York City, where curriculum is so thoroughly an outgrowth of experience that social studies are rarely if ever referred to as a subject matter area, has worked for many years on programs based on experiences provided for children through school services.⁶

In this school, children may enter at an age as early as three years and participate in a program carefully planned toward social maturing of the individual. They come to the middle years with a long experience in group life, and orientation in the work-life patterns of their community, a background—even a developed skill and technique—in dramatic play. Throughout their school life rich opportunities for expression in the arts are basically integrated into the total program. Where subject matter begins or experience leaves off is hard to determine in such a program.

This school believes that (a) children in the upper elementary grades need firsthand experiences in order to learn; (b) living and playing out community patterns have validity if the situation is one which provides for the genuine needs of the school world of the child; (c) seeing similar needs in the small school community and in the larger world is not only possible but sound learning; (d) identification with the people who make and do relates children emotionally as well as intellectually to our culture and its roots. The school believes that vitality of learning through the recreation of experience need not be ended with block play nor even with the doll house or play stores of the first and second grades. Finally the child is ready and eager to learn ways of life remote from his own through the written word.

Group play-work life is built into the school program. Class jobs, which the children assume as their responsibility according to their age group and within the school tradition, form the base for social studies experiences. For many years now the third graders have run a school post office, the fourth graders a school supplies store, the fifth and sixth graders the school print shop.⁷ The fifth graders are responsible for the hand printing of posters, signs, lunch menus and even the reading charts for the beginning readers. The sixth graders operate a press printing shop which turns out all the business forms for the school, some special jobs and, at least once a year, a magazine of the children's writings.

These class jobs are important in the total curriculum of this school. The possibilities for integrated teaching of skill subjects are practically unlimited and the teachers do not waste their opportunities. For purposes of this discussion, however, consideration will be given to the job program as it relates to the social studies—a part of school curriculum that must build into the child's life and personality more than a residue of facts and skills or it has failed dismally in its purposes. Children appreciate the values of truly meaningful learning experiences.

The third grader who returned to the classroom flushed with excitement after delivering an unusually heavy batch of mail stated the case when she said, "Gosh, I love to be eight.⁸ We're so important, you know. I don't know how this school would ever get along without the post office." Here is a child achieving responsibility on her own level, zestfully in a play-like situation but with real school life obligations fulfilled. The ten-year-old who offers to make a special price on a print job when ink smudges appear "because our prices are really for perfect work. They charge less for

damaged things in the stores, don't they?" is developing an attitude of social responsibility as well as good standards of work. The sixth graders who beg permission to come to school on Saturday in order to get out the rush orders on Christmas cards recognize their obligation and revel in their contribution too. "This is more fun than soccer," they tell themselves after a morning of determined work.

But how does all this become social studies? What about content? Does the school set up a curriculum? How closely are teachers guided by it? How is the children's learning evaluated? These are some of the questions which the teachers, who, with the children, are the curriculum builders, constantly ask themselves.

Some answers can be given—directly. It is in the philosophy and purpose of this school to provide social studies content in each year's program. The adult goal is laid down in broad outline to be filled in by the needs and interests of the children in a particular group. There is a sequential pattern, recognized as a basic outline but not rigidly adhered to. Learning is evaluated in terms of social attitudes, relationship thinking, study skills, creative expression, and group living. It is hoped that the class job will provide the shared group experience which makes exploration of the social studies content valid, even necessary, from the child's point of view.

The American story, as it grows out of our land, our Western European heritage, our technology and social philosophy, can be made available to the understanding of the young child. If we strive for understandings rather than for the accumulation of facts, if we give action to ideas, if we underpin intellectual concepts with emotional reaction, we can so live with children in a social studies experience that an ambitious dream becomes a reality. And this in essence is the curriculum outline for the school.

Content areas as set up for each year are:

Eight-year-old children who know their "here and now" world through firsthand experience, dramatic play, construction materials, and creative opportunities, use their post-office experience as a springboard into the study of the far away and long ago. They may discover how mail is carried in other parts of our country nowadays and why, or they may find out that messages were carried quite differently long ago. The children arrive at the major understanding of inter-relatedness of peoples, their common needs, and even an appreciation of differing ways of satisfying needs in terms of the time and place where people live.

The nine-year-olds find in their store any number of possible lines of social studies investigation. The focus may be trading and trade routes leading to an elementary study of world geography. The goods sold in the store may be traced back to their source so that the children study paper making and lumbering, or the hot jungle lands where rubber for erasers grows. Again emphasis is on relationships—man and his environment, physical and social, scientific and artistic. The frame of reference remains our own community. The likenesses and the differences among peoples are constantly examined against the pattern of our culture. A way of life as an adaptation to man's environment is the major concept stressed and developed.

The roots of our culture pattern—language, law, art, music, religion—become appropriate

material or study as these ten- and eleven-year-old children work at their printing jobs. With teacher guidance and stimulation, children ask, “Why do we make an ‘A’ like this? What is an alphabet? What good is it? Who invented it anyway? What kind of people were these and how did they live?” Perhaps they even dare to ask, “Did people always have our kinds of religions? And who made our religions and why?”

They learn to wonder at the artifacts and the arts of people who lived so long ago. They begin to understand steam, electric, and atomic power as the cornerstone of our era. One group of ten-year-old children related the facts of a slave culture—the many toiling to produce for the few—as basic to a man and muscle power age.⁹ They could see our democracy as related to the technological revolutions of past centuries. And being young they could even project the scientific upheavals of our times toward a future which uses knowledge with wisdom and love for mankind.

One needs to emphasize and underscore the child-like quality of the experiences in which such learnings take place. A discussion of method, however brief, may serve to do this. The first weeks of school for any class carrying on a job program are largely devoted to setting up the job, practicing the new skills called for, getting the group organized as special individual abilities manifest themselves, and carrying the responsibilities of the job as the school community swings into action and materials and services are needed.

All this happens so naturally and is so germane to the purposes of the group that teacher and children could hardly articulate the experiences as a unit study in social living, but it is easily recognizable as such.

Role of the Teacher. The teacher plays an extremely active role at this time, though often not overtly so. She watches her group closely, spotting those children who can carry responsibility easily, those who need help, staving off a too-rapid crystallization of roles within the group, enjoying and appreciating with the children the grown-up quality of the new program. Having planned for the general area of social studies content beforehand with the whole staff, she is now trying to find in the children’s interests leads into her program. A ten-year-old’s question about why the difference between capital and small letters as he prints a sign may be her cue. The hieroglyphics on the obelisk in Central Park observed on a fall picnic may serve. And sometimes the children present interests far from the teacher’s plan, and she needs to relate and use their material for setting the program in motion.

Resources. The teacher, working closely with a well-stocked and expertly staffed library, makes available to the children a variety of readings, mainly stories—what one might call the historical novel on the child level—set in the time and place of the program that is getting underway. She will sometimes read aloud to the whole group a particularly fine story or original material like the *Odyssey*, stories from the Bible, or even excerpts from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. She encourages interruptions for questioning and discussion. She is also searching the community for resources that provide concrete experience. This particular program depends on museums, films, pictures, and most important, the evidences in our lives of the contributions of older cultures.

Utilization of Individual Differences. Sooner than one would expect, questions that need special

research arise and children, individually or in groups, begin to read, take notes, make crude maps, and sometimes make reproductions of tools, buildings, clothes, weapons. The child working on a model of an Egyptian tomb in the carpentry shop or the child reproducing a costume in the classroom is as truly engaged in research for a ten-year-old as the more verbally oriented child who is searching the library for factual answers to his questions. And such a program has a place, even a need, for all kinds of research. When a group is really soaking up the climate (not only temperature and rainfall) of people's lives there is validity to encompassing the *things* of its culture, as well as its manners and modes.

The time soon comes when the children are ready for creative experiences. They want to use their art media—music and language as well as paints and clay—to help them in recreating the ways of life of these strange faraway people. Sometimes there is a synthesizing of all these aspects of the study into an original play, which calls for everyone to contribute facts for a plot, knowledge of dress and artifacts for costumes and properties, architecture for scenery, music and dance for atmosphere.

Growing Sense of Values. The value of the experience often becomes apparent within the process of revealing through expressive media what has been absorbed. When children become earnest searchers for pictures so that costumes will be accurate, when they begin to talk in the vocabulary, even the cadences of the people they are studying, when they hate to put aside their roles and costumes, and want to go on “being” their parts after the play is over; in short, when they identify with a larger experience than the purely personal, increasing their stature thereby, the social studies would seem to have done their part in educating the child. One ten-year-old group expressed much of the relation to a growing world through a beautiful frieze depicting a series of maps from the earliest times to the present. Their high sounding title “Man’s expanding knowledge of his universe” gave the teacher some real insight into the emotional as well as the intellectual satisfaction that the children had gotten from the work—a kind of stretching forward—one could almost hear them growing.

Conclusions

A changing concept of the role of education has brought into sharp focus the need for a broader formulation of curriculum goals and purposes.

A knowledge of child development and growth provides the base of modern educational thinking. The program stems from the needs of the child, which includes in the elementary school years the need for becoming a knowing and functioning member of his group.

Active participating experience provides an optimal climate for learning.

It becomes the school's responsibility, therefore, to seek out learning opportunities, to provide materials, and to develop methods by which the child in living out these planned experiences functions successfully at his own child level and receiving techniques and tools which equip him for intelligent, active participation in the adult society in which he will live.

Sound social goals and attitudes are learned in our schools, but only as programs call for the

practice of good social techniques and as the climate of the classroom demonstrates their value.

Experience, activity, and participation are important in teachers' learning also.

Only as teachers develop awareness of and are excited by the broadening base of their responsibility will the profound changes in school programs be truly understood and the "new" education become a working reality.

Notes

2. Mitchell, Lucy Sprague. *Our Children and Our Schools*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950. p. 31.

3. The first three years of this program in action are described in Lucy Sprague Mitchell's book, *Our Children and Our Schools*, to which reference has already been made.

4. *Ibid.* p. viii.

5. The school is chosen not because we find the answer here but rather because of the writer's own teaching experience and curriculum building opportunities in the programs discussed.

6. Pratt, Caroline. *I Learn from Children*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949.

7. This school takes the children through the eighth grade. The school services carried out by the older children may vary, running the gamut from making toys for the nursery school to a book review magazine for the upper grades. Social studies themes for these grades follow broad outlines to make possible the consideration of group interest from year to year. But whatever the point of departure, it is the planned goal of the school to give these older boys and girls a sense of the major movements in American history.

8. At City and Country School groups are identified according to the age of the children rather than by grades. Roughly the "eights" as they are called would be third grade, "nines" fourth, etc.

9. This discussion followed a trip to the museum to see the Egyptian rooms, most of them filled with the burial vestments of the great—the gold encrusted mummy cases, the fabulous jewels found in the tombs. But the teacher-guide took pains to have them see also the reconstruction of a slave's grave with its poor little clay pots to appease the gods and its measly burial cloth around the skeleton.