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## Rights & Responsibilities: My Years at Bank Street

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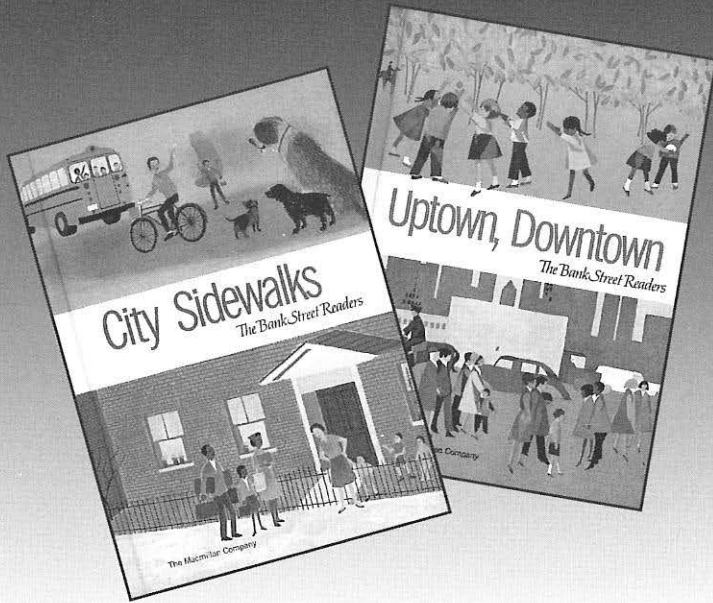
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# Rights & Responsibilities

My Years at  
Bank Street

John H. Niemeyer  
President Emeritus

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## My Years at Bank Street

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President Emeritus

John H. Niemeyer served as president of Bank Street College of Education from 1955 through 1973. Attached are two sample chapters from a work in progress derived from conversations between John Niemeyer and Dick Greenspan. They discussed Bank Street's work during the tumultuous years of the 1950s and 1960s when civil rights and school integration were changing the face of American education.

JN: Let me give you some background. Traditionally at Bank Street there had always been an emphasis upon the role of books for children as educational forces. That started with Mrs. Mitchell in her writing the *Here and Now Story Book* in 1921. Incidentally, they still come across unbelievably well. And in the 1930s Bank Street began writing a textbook series for Health and Company that would stress human geography. In many ways, they were not perceived as readers but as social studies books. However, they were never published (although, I seem to recall that Mrs. Mitchell's "America" *was* published). Anyway, I never have been able to track down why the series was dropped, but it was around 1939, and I think the war clouds were forming. I'm just guessing that. Still, it seemed to me in 1957 that Bank Street had an obligation to do something about this damned stereotypic type of readers that all the little kids of America were using to learn to read.

So, that's why I wrote to Irma Simonton Black. Incidentally, let me say a word about Irma. She had been one of the original students in the new program started in 1931 at Bank Street to educate college graduates to be teachers. Then she became a staff member, a very important staff member, because of her skill in the field of writing for children.

DG: And what was her reaction?

JN: I remember that wonderful evening well. We had wine and stew in Irma's apartment on Jones Street down in Greenwich Village. We kicked around the idea of our own readers and everybody got excited. We began with my vague idea of what could be done, what should be done, and what might possibly be done. Out of that grew firmer ideas and stronger ideas and everybody went away from that very inspired. And by golly, that writing team (all writers of books for children themselves) began pouring out stories. Some of them worked full time at Bank Street, but many only part time when they were needed.

After that evening, I began making notes on story ideas and sending them to Irma. I never wrote any of the finished pieces myself. Most of the ideas came from those talented people. And so, in an amazingly short time, we had ready a mock-up of a book aimed at the first grade. In those early years, we had no money to go further, but Irma was very friendly with Leonard Weisgard, one of the best known and most skillful illustrators for children's books. She got him interested in the book and he provided all the beautiful pictures for it. Then I took it and tried to get it published.

The first thought, of course, from various people was that we should try to get foundation support for this. That idea was intriguing because it might be an easy way to do it. On the other hand, the more I

thought about it (and I'm giving credit to myself, but I'm not positive that is the way it happened historically; it could very well be that others had this idea and passed it on to me), the more I was uneasy about it. For example, if we got the Ford Foundation to pay for the putting out of some books, that would be fine and it would get written up in a magazine or something, and then nothing would happen. If we were really going to make an impact on the school systems and publishers of the country, we'd have to get a publisher to do the job because publishers have all the power. They have the machinery for getting into schools with their field agents and contacts. Of course, a publisher would be interested in making a profit, so the company would make every effort to get the readers sold. That would be the pressure—*increase sales*. Nobody has the power and capacity for doing this other than a publisher. I remember that I made the big mistake of going first to the publisher of the "Dick and Jane" books. I showed him our prototype and gave my pitch on why this new type of reader was needed. I remember his sitting back and then flooring me with the arrogant statement: "Niemeyer, the people want Dick and Jane and we're going to give them Dick and Jane." That ended my appointment right there.

I don't remember how I heard of the editor of educational books for Macmillan. This was before Macmillan became a high-pressure corporation. Then it was still a business with a love of books and a desire to produce good books that they hoped would make a profit. They had a series of readers for schools just like the Dick and Jane series, but the Dick and Jane publisher had 80% to 90% of the business; Macmillan had about 2%. It didn't dawn on me until later that the sensible thing to do would be to find a publisher who wasn't very successful in publishing the "normal" type reader and would like to try something else for a bigger market share. The editor at Macmillan was Leigh Deighton, a lover of books and of good literature. He was interested, examined our material, and over the next few months we worked out the general outline of an agreement. One or two months passed without our hearing from him. The time came when I had to leave for Asia to be a main speaker at a two-week conference of the Australian Pre-School Association. On the way to Australia, I had to give lectures in Bangkok, Thailand, and New Zealand. (My way was paid by the U.S. State Department.) I went away wondering whether we would ever hear and really feeling dejected that I had failed to find support for what I thought was such an important project. When I got back three months later, I found that while I was away, Leigh Deighton had called Victor Segal, Vice President for Business Affairs, and said he was ready to proceed further.

One of the first things I did on my return was to meet with Leigh. He recounted that he'd sounded out salesmen from all over the country, and he got an overwhelming vote of NO on this. They said they couldn't sell such a book, nobody would buy it. You could not have a black child, a black family, a black face in a reader and sell it to the public school systems of this country—North, South, East, or West. "And yet," Leigh continued, "I am convinced it is a good project, even from a business point-of-view. I don't know how to proceed, but let's go on thinking and talking about this."

At that time, I was fortunate in being able to hire a new staff member, who I knew was ready to leave his post as Dean of the Elementary Education Department of Penn State University. I knew that he wanted to move to New York. So, even though Bank Street could not even approach the salary that he'd been receiving, I made him an offer. He wanted so much to come to New York that he resigned from his university job and joined us. His name was Charles Long. I had been able to convince the JF Kaplan Fund to give us a small grant to form a new division at Bank Street that would carry on the work of public school workshops that Bank Street had started during the war. We needed a person like Charles Long to head that division.

DG: Tell me more about these workshops.

JN: I'll deal with that at another time because that's an interesting, complicated, and quite an exciting story in itself!

DG: That's a promise?

JN: Yes. Now, Charlie Long got interested in our *Readers* and he had some time, so he took the sample that had been developed with Leonard Weisgard's illustrations and started visiting superintendents all around the country. By that time, I had already contacted the superintendent of schools in New York City who said New York would buy such a reader if it were published.

DG: Where did Charlie go?

JN: Chicago and Los Angeles. We thought that if we could get the superintendents of those big school systems to say they would buy our books that would be overwhelming evidence that Leigh Deighton could use with his bosses at Macmillan that the *Readers* would indeed sell.

DG: What happened?

JN: Charlie came back with letters from those superintendents that

said, in effect, if you can produce readers comparable to the example you have shown us, we can promise you we will buy those books. I took those to Leigh and he soon called back and said, "Let's go ahead as fast as we can." The letters must have worked!

At this point, we entered into business negotiations. When the details were all worked out, we agreed to create readers for the first three grades of elementary school. And that's how the *Bank Street Readers* were born. They became very popular and were big sellers in all the school systems. The *Readers* escalated Macmillan into becoming one of the dominant publishers in that field for some years. Maybe they still are. The story of what happened subsequently, why we didn't go ahead with the upper three grades, is another story not exactly pertinent right here.

I do want to get on the record that while this venture excited me, the Board of Trustees, the publications division, and people in the public schools, there was less support among the teaching faculty, the staff members who taught theoretical courses to teachers, and especially the teachers in the laboratory school. The lab school, by the way, had grown from being just the nursery-kindergarten school when I arrived to one including fourth or fifth grade. As soon as I came to Bank Street, we decided that the school should go beyond the preschool years if it were really to serve as a laboratory. There was very strong opposition from this group to the projected *Bank Street Readers*. This situation illustrates for me a fascinating dilemma that one meets and must deal with when working with people who are deeply convinced that what they are doing is important and how they are doing it is the correct way.

DG: I don't quite understand.

JN: My guess is that in any organization where you have people who are passionate about their mission, you tend to get a certain amount of parochialism in terms of their inability to accept other approaches. This includes a failure to discuss new ideas thoroughly, which, of course, is a violation of the very spirit of what we call democracy or a liberal society. Since one of the basic tenets of Bank Street was that we did not believe that schools should use a textbook to teach children how to read, the concept of producing *Bank Street Readers* seemed to be diametrically opposed to our beliefs. But on this issue, I had to take a very firm stand, even though there were objections that this was violating what Bank Street stood for.

Although I also was convinced that the best way to teach reading was definitely not to depend upon textbooks, I had an even more compelling belief that the *Readers* offered an answer to the nation's

problem of building an integrated society. Since all public schools were using textbooks to teach reading, and if the desegregation of society was one of the goals of education, we just had to say, "Okay. This may not be the best way to teach reading. But at this moment, in this state of development in education in this country, a new concept in textbook readers could offer a means to build an integrated society." The way textbooks were being used was reinforcing an autocratic, undemocratic society. So the good of society had to take precedence over whether or not we thought that textbooks are the best way to teach reading. I had to take a very firm stand that, in a way, was an autocratic one. I made the decision to go ahead and the Board of Trustees supported it. Believe it or not, it never became a confrontation, but it was, in retrospect, an interesting problem I had to face. I think many who have leadership roles and are faced with the necessity to make a decision between the greater good and the lesser good, the greater evil and the lesser evil, learn ways to live through it. In my mind, it became a kind of philosophical question, which gave me some sense of relaxation in dealing with it. So that's how that problem was handled.

DG: Tell me more about the *Readers*.

JN: Of course. I'd like to get more details into the record. First, Victor Segal, our Vice President for Business Affairs, had a great influence on our favorable contract with Macmillan. Victor found a consultant who was a lawyer experienced in the publishing field. Not only did the *Readers* become a rich source of funding for the College, but the use of the name Bank Street in the title and in advertising (we made that a necessity) gave the name widespread recognition. In the contract, even the comparative size of the type used was specified! On a few points I was afraid we might blow the deal and intervened on Deighton's side, saying, "I'm not so sure, Victor, that that aspect is important to us."

Another aspect of the project was is how long and arduous it was to complete a set of readers, even for three grades. We had to produce the books themselves, plus workbooks and teachers' guides. We worked with a number of outside consultants and, of course, the publishers. I especially remember the art director, Zlata Paces. We interviewed her before she was hired by Macmillan and found her to be a sensitive artist completely in tune with the purpose of our *Readers*. She was responsible for choosing the illustrators, but before she did so, she showed us the work of several candidates and had us pick the one we liked most. Then (and this was the case for every illustration used in every *Reader*), we met with Zlata and reviewed the illustration. We often requested alterations. One of my joys was sitting in on those sessions.



DG: That certainly shows me how much all of you cared about that project.

JN: Thank you. And speaking of an arduous process reminds me that the project, which was begun in 1957, was still unfinished by 1965 or 1966—I cannot remember exactly. The problem of managing the complicated work-flow so that every item was completed on schedule (or else every other part would be delayed) became so time consuming for Irma that she convinced Carl Memling, an author of children's books and part-time member of the publications group, to shift to full time and handle this part of the job.

Carl did an outstanding job and deserves our gratitude for playing a critical role in getting the job done. I remember that on one wall of the project's workroom, he had a work-flow chart. Each item was listed so that everyone could see how things were coming together. Incidentally, that must have been between '64 or '65 because at that time Publications, Research, the Business Office, and my office had moved to three floors of 210 West 14th Street and my workroom was adjacent to Carl's.

My memories about that are also memories of great sadness. One day, Carl was meeting with some of the team when he suddenly slumped over the table with his arms outstretched. Because of what he had just been saying, everyone thought he was kidding, but they soon realized that he was unconscious and immediately phoned 911. The first I knew of it was when I heard the commotion in the hall as the hospital medics arrived. By the time I got there, Carl was stretched out on the table while the medics tried to get his heart going again. They continued for many minutes with all of us standing around, shaken and disbelieving. When they wheeled Carl out, I asked a medic, "Do you think you can save him?" The slow shake of his head said no.

I telephoned Carl's wife Pearl at their home on Long Island and we met at Saint Vincent's Hospital. I had a feeling about what she would have to deal with there.

DG: What a tragic story.

JN: But on a happier note, the project was completed and the series was published to our joy and the joy of the thousands of public school primary teachers who used the *Bank Street Readers*. I have no idea how many read the title page and learned that "Bank Street" referred to the Bank Street College of Education in New York City.

Two more items, Dick, and I'll end this.

DG: I hate to have you stop.

JN: Thank you. Remember that one goal of our *Readers* was to help the movement to integrate society. And maybe you've been thinking, well, what effect did the *Bank Street Readers* have? There's no way I can answer that. I just am certain that what children see in textbooks as being the ideal society (100% white and middle class), the impact of that is long-lasting and distorting, both for those who feel "I belong" and those who feel "I don't belong." One thing is clear, however—the moment other reader publishers were aware of the new Macmillan series, they began to change their books. At first, major publishers simply pulled a folio here and there and substituted the same middle-class looking children and adults with black faces. But within two years, every major series was drastically revamped. They even began to hire good writers. The "market" forces worked quickly, this time on the side of, shall I say, virtue.

DG: Why didn't you go on to create your *Readers* for the upper grades?

JN: The "market" again. By 1968 Macmillan, controlled by financial managers (Deighton was gone), decided they could make more profit by hiring their own writers and do the whole job in house. They were right, of course. We had provided them with the tool to capture a major part of the market for our type of readers and they didn't need us anymore. They even sold their new series for the first three grades, and their salesmen stopped recommending *Bank Street Readers*. Fortunately, we were protected by the tough contract Segal had negotiated, so we continued for some years to get some income.

I should add that our hearts really weren't in any effort to extend our *Readers* to the upper grades, except for the income they would produce. The Publications Group, now under the leadership of Bill Hooks (another author of important juvenile books), turned its attention to creating a completely different type of reader for the upper elementary grades—a library of paperback short stories with teacher guides rather than one or two readers per grade level. Houghton Mifflin was interested, a statement of principles was signed, and the first set of books was put into print. Then, a widespread curtailment of spending for public schools occurred and Houghton Mifflin ran into financial difficulties. So the whole program "died aborning." It was a brilliant idea and, unlike *Bank Street Readers*, would have influenced a better way of teaching reading. Its time just hadn't come.

DG: That's too bad.

JN: Well, school systems are always, shall I say, groping for answers. In 1966, when we started with the idea of *Bank Street Readers*, some

schools were going through a time when segregation was being replaced by integration. There's one story that illustrates this "groping" I'm talking about.

In one of the *Readers* was a beautiful story called "The Beautiful Black Princess." She lived in a beautiful castle made of gleaming black glass. The purpose of the tale is obvious. Black is often associated with dirty, inferior, or repulsive. So, in our story, let's get kids—all kids—thinking of black in the opposite way. Two or three years later, the phrase "black is beautiful" was used by militant African Americans as a powerful tool to restore self-esteem and build racial pride.

Before that, when the *Readers* were just out, Leigh Deighton at Macmillan received a phone call from the superintendent in a large city in the Midwest. His Board of Education had just voted to adopt the *Bank Street Readers* on the condition that the publisher would remove one story, "The Beautiful Black Princess." They did not want to offend all their Negro parents, they said!

Deighton refused, of course, and called me to relate the incident. A year or so later, that school system adopted the *Readers* with the story and, I would hope, with all the pride it stood for.

September 7, 1995



## A Bank Street Special Project in Stamford

JN: In this interview, Dick, I'm going to devote my time to talking about one of a number of special projects that were so typical of Bank Street in those later days of my presidency. These are projects in which I was personally very much involved.

Our intervention as an outside agency in the Stamford, Connecticut school system is a good example. Stamford had been under court order to desegregate their schools, but by as late as 1971, they had failed to show any progress in one of their elementary schools: Rile School, kindergarten through grade four, was 100% African American. It so happened that the chairperson of the Board of Education in Stamford at that moment was a woman whose name unfortunately I do not recall, but who knew about Bank Street, apparently from some of our graduates who lived in that area. She came to Bank Street to visit the School for Children and then came to me to ask if it would be possible for us to turn the Rile School into a Bank Street-type school.

DG: Why did she want that?

JN: Because she thought if they could have a similar program, they would then have parents from other districts wanting to send their children to Rile School, and it would desegregate itself. She wanted to know if we would be willing to do the job and what we would propose to do.

I was excited at the idea, got colleagues together, and quickly put forth a proposal to her to the effect that if the Stamford Board of Education would authorize us to run Rile School within the existing system and under the superintendent and the principal, we would guarantee that in five years the chairperson's hopes and, therefore, desegregation would be accomplished. Actually, I was pretty sure it would be accomplished sooner than that. Our budget was only \$150,000 the first year, and it went down over the next two years. At her invitation, I attended a meeting of the School Board and made a presentation. I guaranteed that their school integration objective would be met, but they would have to agree in writing to certain specifications. The first step would be an official vote of the Board of Education authorizing the program and directing the superintendent to support the work. I knew that this step was essential because, from the very first minute to the very last minute, the superintendent was utterly opposed to the plan.

He thought it was insulting to have people from the outside coming in and telling him how to run his school system.

DG: What were your other requirements?

JN: First, there had to be a principal who was interested in the plan and eager to be personally involved. The teachers who were there would be given the option to take appointments in other schools if they didn't want to take on this new assignment. Any vacancies would be open to volunteers. The teachers would be informed of the kind of extra work that would be involved. We were pretty sure they would get excited about it and love the extra work in the long run, but they had to agree in advance. Another requirement was that, at least once a month, all teachers and the principal would spend a half day at Bank Street College visiting the School for Children, talking with our teachers, and having seminars where they could raise questions and discuss problems. At Rile, there had to be a classroom assistant for each teacher in the kindergarten and the first grade. A full-time staff developer would be located in the building, and either that developer or somebody else (actually it turned out to be me) would work with the principal on a regular basis. We would have complete control over the curriculum and the classroom organizations within the boundaries of any state or local laws or regulations.

DG: How did they respond to all of that?

JN: They agreed to it and, at a later meeting, formally approved it.

DG: Why were you so confident that you would succeed?

JN: One reason was that Rile was a very small school, kindergarten through fourth grade, with 200 children. Another reason was that, by then, I knew that the principal of the school had already been involved by the chairperson of the Board. She had taken him down to visit Bank Street and he fell in love with the School for Children. He really didn't know very much about how to run a school like ours; in fact, he knew almost nothing. His concept of the job was the kind of traditional leadership of schools in most public school systems: the principal knows the answers to all questions, solutions for all problems, and issues orders on what should be done. Of course, the main reason I was so confident was my firm belief (which I hold today) that any school, if organized and run on the principles underlying Bank Street's School for Children, would be a good school.

DG: I can see where the principal was a key player here.

JN: Yes. But did you notice, Dick, that in our requirements for Rile, there was nothing about the involvement of another group of key players—the parents? I guess that says something about me at that time. I have moved only reluctantly (I've been almost kicked) to change my opinion about the role of parents in public schools. In the Bank Street Follow Through program in Macon County, Alabama, I saw the importance of mobilizing parents to be a force in the whole school system and not solely in the schools of their own children. However, in my prior experience as director of the Temple University Laboratory School, I found that it was a very rare parent who could think about the school in terms other than those involving his/her own child. On the other hand, I have always placed the highest priority on involving parents in understanding what and why their children were studying. I felt it very important to encourage their participation in many parts of the program and always to hear what parents were saying. But I had always taken a dim view of giving parents so-called authority or decision-making powers over the curriculum in the schools. But now, looking back to Stamford, I'm disappointed that we didn't include parents on our team in some way. Yet, we were under the pressure of time and knew that the parents would come along if their kids were happy and were learning. I had the confidence to believe the parents would be 100% for us. Still, today I blame myself for not looking enough at the future of those children and families.

DG: Tell me more about the program at Rile.

JN: Of course. First, let me say that, after they came down to Bank Street and heard the details of the Rile plan, not one of the teachers at the school opted to leave. But none of them had been teaching in the style they saw. The program in the classroom had always been the standard—"sit in rows, listen to the teacher, do that, now do this, line up, be quiet"—you know, not really as bad as that, but close to it.

Central to our work was our chief staff developer, Elaine Wickens. She had been a wonderful teacher in the School for Children and later was, for a time, the resident staff developer in the Bank Street Follow Through program in Macon County. We set up one of the rooms at Rile as a teacher resource room and conference center. Elaine was complemented by other specialists from Bank Street. Perhaps one afternoon a week we would hold workshops for the teachers. I remember Claudia Lewis being there talking about children's literature and the teacher's role in introducing children to books. Every day—I think it was every day—Elaine would work one-to-one with teachers. They really needed practical help that went beyond just "learning about" what to do.

DG: Give me an example of what Elaine would do.

JN: Well, I remember one day sitting in on a conference she held with a third or fourth grade teacher. The project or unit was to grow out of the work of a banana processing plant located within walking distance of Rile. Elaine and the teacher had visited the plant and made arrangements for a visit by the children. You can see the vast number of directions this study could take: geography, science, drama, history, a look at different cultures, all the kinds of work behind a simple banana on your cereal. And map making, writing, perhaps a class play! For the conference, Elaine had collected a number of books for reading and reference. She was going through these quickly with the teacher, saying, "Now in making a plan for introducing this, sit down and read these yourself. See what you yourself get excited about, and that may be the starting point."

You see, Dick, the staff developer was leading the teacher into planning and the need to study and learn. Even in the short time I was there, I got the impression that the teacher had little background knowledge. I felt sure that she had only the vaguest idea of where Panama was located.

DG: I'd like you to talk about what you taught those teachers.

JN: You see, the whole concept of curriculum in a Bank Street School is different from what is thought of as standard. Curriculum is not a half an hour a day or 40 minutes a day devoted to a math lesson, and then to a reading lesson, and so on. In fact, at the start of school, the day itself is organized so that the children have a different experience. They don't line up and march into the classroom together. Instead, when they come into the classroom, they sign in in a way that is appropriate to the age of the child. In kindergarten, for example, you would put a star, or whatever the symbol is, to show you are there. By the time you get to the first and second grade, when the children come in, they know what the very first thing is that they're going to do. The room is set up to accommodate this. There's a section where there are books and a rug you can lie down on if you want to. Manipulative materials that are age appropriate are available. There are things to do. Then, after a while, every child may begin to write a little bit of something, no matter how little it is, in a diary or perhaps in a book that nobody reads except them.

Of course there's socialization. These are kids, and they haven't seen each other since yesterday. But the teacher is there, not giving out orders or anything of the kind, but guiding learning on a one-to-one



basis. Then, let's say, at 8:40 or 9:19, they all come together and outline the plan for the day. The teacher presents some topics as either "musts" or "options." Much of each class's program is organized around what we call social studies. Some of that work will be done in a whole group, but most of it will be done in smaller groups. There will always be a period of time during the day when there'll be a workshop and art, in the room or elsewhere.

DG: And that type of setup is helped by the teacher having an assistant?

JN: Very essential at the kindergarten and first grade level. Really essential if you're going to break up the group like that.

DG: A full-time assistant?

JN: Full time. In my opinion, it should continue beyond first grade, but that was as much as we dared get the system in Stamford to swallow. But after first grade, if the children become accustomed to this kind of an environment, the amazing thing is that the discipline problems practically disappear. There are always one or two kids who will act up or are hyperactive or come into school angry or hurt because of things that have happened outside of school (after all, you have to kick somebody or something else because you can't kick your mother). Still, the teacher doesn't have the burden of constantly shushing a whole group or making them line up. That line up is a perfect place to punch each other!

DG: So because the children are so involved in their studies, they get diverted.

JN: Yes. Because they really are involved. That's not to say that we don't provide time to blow off steam. We insist that there be physical education of some kind, and that again depends on what's available around there. At Rile, there was a small playground. There wasn't a general recess for everybody with a bell ringing; instead, the teachers planned together what the physical program would be.

DG: Was it difficult for those teachers to readjust from their regular public school mentality?

JN: Oh, yes. It was very difficult for them.

DG: What were some of the difficulties?

JN: Well, first of all, as a traditionally trained teacher, you've come through a training school and have been taught to teach a certain way; now, when you find yourself not standing up in the room and giving

directions on everything, you begin to sense that you're losing power. You're losing control and venturing into the unknown. You're scared. One job of the staff developer is helping teachers know how to ask questions and how to deal with the questions. You know, teachers are absolutely horrified at the thought that they should say, "I don't know." We try to get teachers to realize that by saying to a child—"You know, I don't know that but let's go and find out" or "Tonight I'm going to look it up in such-and-such a book, and I'll bring it in tomorrow and we'll see what we can find out"—they are becoming part of the learning process. It's important for children to have the feeling that the teacher is also a learning person. But you know how very difficult it is to get teachers to show it. It's not easy to do, period! You just have to really practice it. So that's part of what goes into working with a staff developer.

DG: What about discipline?

JN: The staff developer works with the teacher on this. How do you deal with the recalcitrant child? What do you do if a child comes in, let's say, at the age of five and just has to kick other people and slam everything? To start with, you know that something's happened emotionally in that child's life, and you have to have various ways to deal with that. Sometimes the child will come out and tell you; sometimes he won't. You may never know that his dog died. You do know that you have to be sensitive to these things. So you talk with the staff developer about possible ways to achieve this. That's all learning, and it gets exciting for teachers when they have a staff developer and other people supporting them who can help them think through some of these problems and find alternative ways to handle them. Sometimes, such problems can be utterly frustrating. No teacher (including the staff developer or the psychologist) knows how to handle everything, but there are ways to approach the problem. There are also techniques or ways of interacting with other human beings, whether they are five years old or nine or 29. These strategies can be learned and practiced.

DG: What was the role of the principal in all this?

JN: Well, the role of the Rile principal, who supported us early on, was, first of all, to see that the school was an effective instrument that teachers could be happy with and use effectively.

During the summer before our program started, he was in charge of the building changes: painters repainted most of the rooms; in the first and second grades, carpenters built a structure in each classroom so that the kids could get under and on top of it as well as sit and look

down on others—even the adults—like an inside tree house! The principal spent a lot of time seeing that the supplies were there on time, managing the school, going to all the meetings, plus filling out reports. Still, he had to change his thinking about his own methods. But since he had sat in on our planning meetings and had visited the Graduate School, he was constantly changing his old ways. Once a week I would meet with him and talk over whatever he wished. That usually meant problems. I can remember that many times I would ask myself, “How in the hell am I going to change him from doing such and such?” It took him a long time before he truly realized that issuing a written directive was not an effective way to get things done. If he were dissatisfied with a teacher, it was his responsibility to start talking with that teacher, not in terms of evaluation, but in terms of problems that he was seeing and that he thought the teacher was seeing. This type of problem solving was a whole new way of dealing with people. And so, practically all of my time the first year at Rile was spent with him, going over what he was planning to do. We dealt with his frustrations because the superintendent was constantly, in every little way he could, trying to throw a monkey wrench into the program. No specific example comes to mind, but I do recall that it was a constant. I would come in and the principal would be furious over something that had happened, and I’d have to calm him down and let him see the bigger picture. “Remember,” I would say, “we’ve got a whole program here. We’re going to take time. And we’re not going to win the superintendent over, maybe ever, so we have to learn to work around him.”

DG: What were the results?

JN: By the third year the waiting list at Rile from non-African American children from other parts of Stamford was very long. Actually, by the end of the second year, the racial balance was 50:50. Of course, what happened was that the educated, probably upper-income people found out what was going on at Rile. They came to visit the school and wanted their children in it. So, instead of waiting five years (the goal we’d promised), Rile Elementary had achieved its balance in two.

At the end of the third year, I left Bank Street and didn’t participate again. But the program went on for, I believe, about three years—always on a diminishing scale. Two other schools were trying to emulate Rile. At the end of the fourth year, the Rile building was razed and those children were all enrolled in other schools. There were now two schools that called themselves, not Bank Street schools, but Rile-type schools.

DG: You said you “left Bank Street.” Tell me more about that.

JN: In the late 60s, I proposed that we should have an agreed-upon retirement date, and discussed it with my colleagues. The age of 65 was proposed by a committee and approved by the Board. So, three years before I turned that age, I informed the Board that in three years I would retire and that a process for choosing a new head should begin at once. It would take one year for the process to get organized. Then it could well take two more years to find and hire the new person, although it was highly probable they would do so in the second year. I proposed they give me a contract (which I had never had or wanted) that guaranteed my salary for three years and I, in turn, would promise not to take another job until my three years were served.

DG: And the Stamford project fitted in where?

JN: The first year—I believe it was 1972—I worked in Stamford one day each week, and one-fifth of my salary was in the project budget. My role, as you recall, was chiefly to work with the Rile principal, attend school board meetings, and win at least a neutrality posture from the superintendent. The superintendent and I got along well, but he hated my guts, I'm pretty sure, before it was all over.

The second year of the project was my final year as president, but not my last year as staff member, so my time at Stamford had to be cut back drastically. Actually, I wasn't needed as much. The following year, when I was no longer president, my primary job (assigned by me when I was still president) was Stamford, and I spent three days a week there. I deliberately chose this assignment because I wanted to be away from the College much of the time.

DG: Why?

JN: The best way to answer that is to tell you a story. In 1957 Mrs. Mitchell came in from her home in Greenwich to tell me she was moving to Palo Alto, California. I was shocked. My frequent meetings with her had been inspiring experiences for me. "Why, Lucy, why?" I practically cried. She replied, "Jack, I know me. If I stay around here, I'll meddle!" The word meddle came out as only Lucy could say it. So, rightly or wrongly, I decided I would not meddle, either.

DG: You're a thoughtful man.

JN: Lucy was a good teacher in so many ways.

DG: When you increased your days at Stamford, what did you do?

JN: Chiefly, I worked with a number of the other elementary school principals who expressed an interest in what was going on at Rile.

I remember one school where I spent a lot of time. This school was facing drastic expansion and remodeling of its building in the following year. The teachers could talk of nothing but their fears of shifting classrooms, the noise and dust, the dangers to children and so on.

I told the principal about a school I knew in France that each year took a topic, and then all classes from kindergarten up studied some phase or aspect of that topic. I suggested, "How about devoting a part of your curriculum to the topic 'Our New Building' for every grade this coming year?" I explained that the topic could lead to such studies or activities as history, architecture, various construction jobs, making models, art work, writing letters, visiting a cement plant, etc. The parents could be involved, in fact, would be needed. Each age level could pick aspects that fitted into its curriculum (age appropriate). And the focus would be changed from "This horrible nuisance" to "What an exciting time this is!"

DG: Sounds great. What happened?

JN: The principal sounded interested and we talked it over a number of times. She asked me to present the idea to the teachers. Her vibes signaled skepticism. At the big meeting, there were some questions that suggested real interest, but I had no sense of general enthusiasm. That was late in the spring. My guess is they put the idea aside as being between quirky and interesting. I never had a chance to go back. Instead, that fall and for the next three years, I was immersed in helping install a new computer-assisted mathematics programs in one of the large public school districts in Brooklyn when I was with a research company that once was located at Columbia University.

DG: I think that school lost a golden opportunity to revitalize its program. And that leads me into my next question. What are the chances of getting this Bank Street model into the New York City public schools? I'm sure you've tried many times, and it seems to be so ready for a new direction.

JN: Well, you'll find a lot of Bank Street right now, 1996, at Midtown West here on 47th Street. And out of state, you'll also find it in the first three grades (kindergarten through second grade) in many of the schools in Pittsburgh. There are other schools in Manhattan as well. But the Bank Street approach involves more than one or two elements of curriculum or classroom organization. There are no quick answers. There is no easily adaptable "model."

You notice that when I get talking about how you have to work with teachers, I'm really talking about many elements: devel-

oping sensitivity to the whole program, to each other, and to the feelings of children. I believe you must let the child see that you, the teacher, are excited about learning and you don't know everything. Learning is an adventure for both of you. At the same time, there are good ways of teaching reading and lousy ways of teaching reading, good ways of teaching arithmetic and bad ways of teaching arithmetic, and so on. You have to learn to always "push" learning. Teaching, Dick, is a very complex professional job and it's never appreciated by most people as such.

DG: But why can't the Bank Street concept be more accessible to New York City teachers and schools?

JN: For an answer to that, look at Rile. If the superintendent had had his way, it wouldn't have happened. He didn't believe in that sort of "thing." He believed in an organized, traditional-type classroom with all the decisions coming from the top. Further, the School Board would never have approved if they hadn't been under court order to desegregate.

DG: Are there ways to surmount these obstacles, especially here in NY?

JN: I never give up hope. But in our study of principals, we've always come up against widespread resistance to change. And the complexity of the system also thwarts change in every way possible.

DG: You've tried it in different schools over the years, I'm sure.

JN: Part of the problem is you can't just "try" it. There are too many parts to "it." I think it would be interesting for you to interview some Bank Street graduates who have gone into the public schools and see. For example, Bob Schwartz is a graduate and, as of last year, he was running...

DG: Central Park East. But they're not a regular public school. I'm talking about a regular...

JN: I know you say that, but it's still a public school.

DG: Okay. In addition to him. How would we find out the names of others?

JN: If I could answer the question on Bank Street not being adopted by NYC any more than I've just tried to, I would. I mean, why does a wonderful school like PS 29 in the Bronx not spread to all other public schools?

DG: There must have been many attempts to get it here.

JN: Of course. That's what Bank Street exists for. We're constantly working at it.

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